

# **Booked Study Guide**

**Booked by Kwame Alexander**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Alexander, Kwame. *Booked*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York. 2016.

The entire book is written, except where noted, in blank verse. Most material is present tense, with the exception of remembered material, which is in past tense. Dialogue poems, of which there are several, are printed with Nick's dialogue in regular typeset, with the words of other speakers printed in italics. A "/" in the summary or a quote indicates a line break within a stanza; a "//" in the summary or a quote indicates a break between stanzas.

Nick's story begins on a day when everything seems to be relatively normal: he sleeps late, after playing on-line soccer into the night; his parents are arguing; and he is caught daydreaming in school. Narration reveals that Nick's father is a writer, and has published a dictionary of unusual but meaningful words, a dictionary that he wants Nick to memorize (throughout the book, examples of those words and their definitions appear in the text). Narration also reveals that Nick's mother loves horses, and has been invited to work with high-level racing horses in another state. Her decision to take the job (partly because things are difficult between her and Nick's father) triggers the first major change in Nick's life: the realization that his family is no longer a unified one.

Meanwhile, Nick's regular school routine continues, albeit in a more unfocused way than usual, given that the girl he has a crush on (April) seems to like him back. Complicating this situation is the presence of the bullying Eggleston twins, one of whom (Don) sees April as his girl, and bullies Nick out of spending more time with her.

Throughout all this, Nick develops an unlikely friendship with Mr. MacDonald, the school librarian and a former rap producer who encourages the reluctant Nick to read. Nick also continues to practice soccer, preparing to go with his team to an important tournament in Texas. He is joined in his love of the game by his buddy Coby, a mixed-race immigrant who plays for a rival team; who encourages Nick in his attempts to spend time with April; and who is also on the receiving end of bullying from the Egglestons. Coby, however, fights back, unlike Nick, who continues to feel victimized by the Egglestons, by his seemingly cold father, and by his parents' divorce.

Nick's struggles to cope with all of these changes in his life become even more complicated when he develops a perforated appendix, a situation that leads to emergency surgery that keeps him out of the tournament in Dallas. In the aftermath of the surgery, his mom comes back home to live with him and his dad again, and for a while Nick believes that his parents are going to get back together. But just when he is getting ready to go back to school and resume his routine, his parents announce that they are getting a divorce. Nick reacts with anger and frustration.

Eventually, as Nick grows physically stronger (in the aftermath of his surgery) and mentally stronger (in response to Mr. MacDonald's support, Coby's encouragement, and



April's attention), Nick gets up the nerve to fight back when the Egglestons bully him yet again. He does not win the ensuing fistfight, but he does find a new feeling of courage and hope for the future, both of which are represented by the mysterious Dragonfly Box given to him by Mr. MacDonald. As the story concludes, Nick opens the box (named "Freedom" by Mr. MacDonald), and shows Coby its contents. The narrative never reveals what those contents are.



## Part 1, p. 1 – 18

### Summary

"Gameplay." This evocative celebration of playing soccer is constructed in a series of rhyming couplets. Key letters in several words are capitalized and bolded and spell SOCCER.

"Wake Up Call." This single stanza poem describes how, while waking up after a late night of playing an online soccer game, "you" (2) wake up to hear your mother arguing with your father over the phone.

"Questions." The narrator's mother comments on how much time he spent playing soccer on his Xbox. The narrator says his dad is not there and that he (the narrator) is "sick of reading his stupid words" (3).

"Why couldn't your dad." As the poem continues the title, the narrator asks himself why his dad could not be something other than the linguistics professor that he is, particularly one who wrote a dictionary ("Weird and Wonderful Words") with "footnotes" (4). The text includes a footnote relating to the definition of "verbomania," an obsession with words.

"In the elementary school spelling bee." As the poem continues the title, the narrator describes how, after a deliberate misspelling of a relatively easy word, his father got very upset. He (the narrator) describes himself as living in "a prison / of words" (5), and that he hates words. The word HATE is bolded and enlarged.

"Giddy up." In this dialogue poem, the narrator's mother beats him handily at ping pong, teasing him playfully and kissing him after he loses yet again. The title is something his mother says just before the last point of the game.

"Mom." As the poem continues the title, the narrator describes how his mother used to race and train horses, but no longer does it because the family now lives in the city. He also describes how she had a chance to train a horse again, but because it meant moving "to some small town / with no university ... Dad said No with a capital N" (9).

"Blackjack on the Way to School." This three-line poem is the story of a moment where the narrator and his best friend Coby play blackjack on the way to school, and the author wins.

"Ms. Hardwick's Honors English Class." As the poem continues its title, it comments that the class is so boring that the narrator has become a professional at daydreaming.

"The Beautiful Game." In this three-stanza poem, the narrator (whose name is now revealed to be Nicholas Hall) imagines himself in the middle of an important international soccer game. Just as he is about to score a goal, "Ms. Hardwick / streaks /



across the field // in her heels and / purple polyester dress / yelling // NICHOLAS HALL / PAY / ATTENTION!" (14).

"The thing about daydreaming in class." As the poem continues the title, Nicholas comments on how difficult daydreaming makes it to stay focused on what is happening in class. He gives an answer to a question (about the meaning of the phrase "to nip something in the bud") that makes everyone in the class laugh – everyone, that is, but Ms. Hardwick.

"Busted." Ms. Hardwick warns Nicholas, apparently for the last time, about not paying attention in class. Another student (the snotty Winnifred) gives both the correct question and the correct answer, and Ms. Hardwick reiterates that the phrase "is a metaphor / for dealing with a problem / when it is still small / and before it grows / into something LARGER" (17). As she says it, she looks straight at Nicholas. She goes on to point out the word for his mistake (malapropism), which he recognizes and understands (it means using a word that sounds like an intended word, but means something different), and tells Nicholas to find other examples in the book currently being studied, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. The definition of malapropism appears as a footnote – a definition, that is, that Nicholas writes in his terms.

## Analysis

As Part 1 introduces the book's central character (Nick), its central conflict (between Nick and books, as represented in part by his father), and its central themes (primarily its focus on the value of language), it also introduces its central stylistic premise. This is the idea that the story is being told through narrative poetry, language and structure that is shaped into blank verse – that is, poetic writing defined by language focused on imagery, specificity, and detail, without a great deal of attention paid to particular rhythm or rhyme. While the majority of the book is written in this stylistic format, there are also several ways in which the author develops exceptions to that basic style. Part 1 also contains several notable examples of this, including the very first poem, which is what might be described as a more traditional poem, with clear rhythmic and rhyming patterns.

Other examples of stylistic variation might be called stylistic commentary, or reinforcement of meaning through emphasis by bolding, capitalization, or other techniques of emphasis, or highlighting. One such technique of emphasis manifests in "The Beautiful Game," in which the last line of the poem is separated from the other lines in the poem, as indicated by // in the quote. This separation of the last line highlights its content, indicating its importance to the situation being portrayed. This particular technique is deployed throughout the book.

Another point to note about "The Beautiful Game" relates to its title – specifically, the broader range of its meaning. "The beautiful game" is an internationally recognized term for soccer. The exact origins of the term are not entirely clear, but it is generally



accepted that its use was popularized by Brazilian soccer legend Pele, who is referred to several times in the book as an idol, or role model for Nick and Coby, among others.

Important narrative elements to note in this section include several important pieces of foreshadowing. These include the references to conflict and tension between Nick's parents (which foreshadow later moments of deepening conflict, and revelations about how deep that conflict runs), as well as the reference to blackjack. This foreshadows several points later in the narrative where Coby and Nick continue their ongoing game, and also several points where Nick uses the term "blackjack" to indicate when he feels particularly successful about having accomplished a particular goal. More foreshadowing occurs in the references to "malapropisms," which foreshadow several points in the story where bantering wordplay, including the deliberate use of malapropisms, develops and defines important relationships with characters. Such wordplay also adds a facet of additional exploration to the book's thematic consideration of the power of language.

Then there are examples of what might be called stylistic foreshadowing, in which a particular stylistic technique that appears here foreshadows later appearances of the technique (or motif) in the story. A notable example of this is the appearance of the footnote motif, which appears throughout the book and which contains ironic, wry commentary from Nick that takes the footnoted definition in the direction of something more than just the dictionary definition.

A final point to note has to do with Nick's comment that he feels his father's emphasis on words is a kind of prison. This can be seen as an important element of a thematically central through-line for the narrative, in that by the time the story concludes, Nick has had a series of varied experiences that lead him out of the various types of imprisonment that he experiences into new and different understandings of freedom.

## Discussion Question 1

How do the events and situations of Part 1 explore the narrative's thematic interest in the tension between freedom and fear?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does this section portray the different characters of Nick's parents? In what ways, do you think, does the fact that the story is told from Nick's perspective affect or define those portrayals?

## Discussion Question 3

What is it about Nick's behavior that the phrase "nip it in the bud" relates to?



## Vocabulary

chronic, convertible, linguistics, intentional, course (v.), contagious, malapropism, ludicrous





## Part 2, p. 19 – 42

### Summary

"After School" – Nicholas tells Coby he cannot play soccer after class, explaining in narration that he has got a two-hour special class that his mother signed him up for, a class in which he gets to spend time with a girl named April. He lies to Coby and says he has to do homework.

"At Miss Quattlebaum's School of Ballroom Dance and Etiquette." As the poem continues its title, Miss Quattlebaum instructs the girls and boys in her class on overly-formal manners, and then sets them up to dance with each other. Instead of getting to dance with April, Nicholas has to dance with "a girl with chronic halitosis" (21).

"Chivalry." Nicholas (now referred to as Nick) attempts to open the door for April, but another guy beats him to it. Nick then tries to start a conversation with April, but is interrupted by his waiting mother. Embarrassed, Nick jumps into the car and tells her to hurry away (his request is bolded and enlarged). April comments that she is sorry they did not get to dance together.

"The Pact." A short, three line poem in which the author reveals a secret pact made by Nick and Coby about getting a girlfriend before the beginning of ninth grade.

"Ever since first grade." As the poem continues its title, Nick describes how long he and Coby have been friends, and how they ended up playing on opposing soccer teams.

"Best friend." In a series of three-line stanzas, Nick outlines Coby's heritage (his parents are from Singapore and Ghana), his obsession with soccer, and how Nick rarely sees the inside of Coby's bedroom because it smells.

"Bragging Rights." After soccer practice, Nick looks forward to reading Coby an important letter to his soccer team. He is shocked, however, when he learns that Coby's team got the same letter.

"The Letter." The letter is addressed to the coaches of the boys' respective soccer teams, and invites the teams to participate in a prestigious soccer tournament in Dallas the following spring.

"Dad's back in town." As this poem, in four-line stanzas, continues its title, Nick is with his dad in the study reading, bored and checking his phone while his dad is working.

"Trash Talk." Coby and Nick text / trash talk each other. After a while, Nick falls silent, which is indicated by / ... /

"PUT. THE. PHONE. AWAY, Nicholas." As the poem continues its title, Nick's father tells him to finish his reading, Nick lies and says he is done. Nick's father realizes he is lying,



and Nick talks back to him, but so quietly that his Nick's father cannot really hear what he has to say. Conversation reveals that Nick's father will be sleeping on the couch that night, and that Nick still has more work to do on memorizing his father's dictionary.

"Trouble." In this short-lined poem, Coby tells Nick that "the twins" (37) are back at school, and that one of them was in the library, talking to April.

"Dean and Don Eggleston." Again in short lines, Nick describes the twins as "pit bull mean / eighth grade tyrants / with beards" (38).

"Fists of Fury." Nick describes how "the twins live / down the block / from Langston Hughes / Middle School of the Arts" (39), how they go to his school because the only art they are interested in "is pugilism" (39), the definition of which is footnoted. The poem is written in a single, short-line stanza.

"The library door." As the poem continues its title, Nick and Coby arrive at the library. Don Eggleston pushes Nick to the ground, warning him to stay away from April.

"When you walk inside." Again as the poem continues its title, April waves from the back corner of the library as Nick and Coby are intercepted by the librarian, Mr. MacDonald.

## Analysis

As it continues on its stylistic path (i.e. telling the story through the use of narrative poetry), Part 2 introduces several important plot elements. These include the relationship between Nick and April (or rather, Nick's hoped-for relationship with April) and the antagonistic relationship between Nick and the Eggleston twins. Both of these elements play key roles in the unfolding of events throughout the remainder of the book, each in its own way exploring and manifesting the book's thematic interest in the relationship (tension?) between freedom and fear. In the case of Nick's relationship with the Eggleston twins, there are also narrative interactions with the theme of bullying and fighting back. As both these themes develop, and as Nick experiences the fear associated with each of these key relationships, he develops the courage to overcome that fear, which in turn leads to a sense of freedom from that fear. That, in its own turn, leads to a sense, for Nick, of the ability to live according to his true identity and goals. This, the book seems to argue over the course of the narrative, is the true meaning of freedom: the chance to live as one wishes and as one is.

Other themes developed in this section include the book's exploration of the power of language (which manifests primarily in the deepening tension between Nick and his father around Nick's reading and absorption of his father's book), and the theme (or motif) of encountering the unexpected. The letter of invitation to participate in the Dallas Cup is Part 2's variation on this theme / motif, which functions in the same way as its other manifestations do: to illustrate how unexpected or unanticipated experiences can change a life.



Meanwhile, other important plot elements introduced in this section include the aforementioned Dallas Cup (Nick's determination to participate in this prestigious soccer tournament is a key component of several later plot elements) and the appearance of Mr. MacDonald. This character, with his backstory, history, and particular perspectives, is developed further in Part 3 and beyond, and proves to be a catalytic (transformative) presence for Nick throughout the remainder of the story.

There are a few other points to note about Part 2, two of which involve key pieces of foreshadowing. The first of these is the description of Coby's origins, which foreshadows later significant plot elements involving experiences with racism, while the second involves the reference to Nick's father sleeping on the couch, a foreshadowing of further developments in the story of the relationship between Nick's parents.

One final noteworthy point about Part 2 has to do with the name of Nick's school. Langston Hughes was an influential African-American poet, whose reputation is built primarily on his development of a style of poetry that integrated the rhythms, attitudes, and creative freedoms of jazz.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Part 3 develop the theme of bullying and fighting back?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think it was / is important to Nick's mother that Nick be enrolled in classes at Miss Quattlebaum's? What do you think she believes he will gain from the experience?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant, to the book's narrative and its themes, that Nick's school is named after an influential poet?

## Vocabulary

halitosis, butane, migration, pugilism, colossal, fanatic, obsequy



## Part 3, p. 43 – 67

### Summary

"Welcome to the Dragonfly Café." Mr. MacDonald invites Nick and Coby to join the book club, the Dragonfly Café, but they both refuse. Mr. MacDonald also jokes about the malapropism incident, which Nick is not happy about. Finally, Mr. MacDonald then starts rapping ...

"Hey, DJ, Drop That Beat." Mr. MacDonald's rap is a partial rhyme about dragonflies, and ends with a warning for the boys to not touch his "dragonfly box" (45).

"Skip MacDonald." Nick describes how Mr. MacDonald (referred to as "The Mac") used to be a rap music producer, but for several reasons (including brain surgery) left the business and became a librarian.

"Huckleberry Finn-ished." At the conclusion of a discussion about "Huckleberry Finn," Winnifred reminds Ms. Hardwick about Nick's assignment to find some more malapropisms. In the midst of his resentment of Winnifred, Nick tells the disbelieving Ms. Hardwick that he has found two. The narrative then includes a visual representation of the two, on a solid black background, in which the words are highlighted, as though cut out of a book and put on paper.

"Class ends." In this short poem, Ms. Hardwick is laughing so hard ("cachinnating") (52) that she runs out into the hallway. There is a footnote describing the meaning of "cachinnating" – to laugh loudly.

"Usually at dinner." As this short-line poem continues its title, Nick comments that usually, dinner involves a fair bit of conversation between his parents, but at one particular dinner, there was silence.

"Breaking the Silence." In this dialogue poem, Nick asks for some money to go to the soccer tournament in Dallas. His mother tells him they will discuss it later, while his father remains strangely silent. Later, Nick is about to go upstairs when his parents call him into their living room for a conversation.

"No Heads-Up." Nick's mother tells him first that she is planning on going back to work. Nick comments in narration that he understands, because he knows how much she has missed working with horses. Nick's mother then tells him that she is moving to Kentucky, and that she and his father are separating. Nick feels his life change.

"Thought." "It does not take / a math genius / to understand that / when you subtract / a mother / from the equation / what remains / is negative" (59).

"Broken." "After you finish / crying / and the sadness finds / a home / in what's left / of your heart" (60), Nick and his mother talk about what's going to happen next - that his



mother will be back every second weekend, and that next summer there will be an attempt to work things out.

"For the rest of the week." As the poem continues its title in a sequence of short, lines, many of which start with "you" or "your," Nick describes the troubled aftermath of learning about his parents, including failing a test and being unable to speak with April. "... you're trapped / in a cage of misery / with freedom / nowhere in sight" (61).

"Conversation Before the Match." In this dialogue poem, Nick reveals his dread of being alone with his father, while Coby reveals his belief that his parents neither like nor love each other.

"Playing Soccer." In this short-line poem, Nick's narration describes the energy and intensity of his soccer practice, all of which is derailed by the goalie breaking a toe. The poem includes a footnoted reference to "futsal," a short, intense, multi-game soccer tournament.

"Game two." In this poem consisting of several two-line stanzas poem, Nick has the ball stolen from him by another player, who scores on the relief goalie.

"No Problemo." As the poem continues its title, the coach tells the team that they have to win their final game to move on to the next round of the tournament. Nick indicates that because the team consists of girls, that victory is inevitable.

"Problemo." In a single stanza of several short lines, the girls' team shakes the hands of the boys' team after beating them.

## Analysis

The first point to note about Part 3 is its introduction of one of the book's most important symbols, the dragonfly. In both its incarnations (in the name of the book club and in the name of the box), the dragonfly can be seen as representing freedom. In terms of the book club, there is the sense (particularly through the actions of Mr. Mac) that freedom is possible through reading. This relates to two of the book's key themes – its exploration of the tension between fear and freedom, and its primary exploration of the power of language. In terms of the box, reasons for the connection between dragonfly and freedom become clear later in the narrative, with the dragonfly box actually playing a key role in the book's narrative and thematic conclusions.

A second, and related point (that is: connected to the entrance of Mr. MacDonald into the story) is a stylistic one. This is the inclusion of several variations within the book's overall emphasis on poetry as its primary narrative style. Rhyme and rhythm appear in the rap-like sequence, grounded in Mr. MacDonald's history as a rapper; there is the white-within-black representation of Nick's "Huckleberry Finn" malapropisms; the repetition of the word "your" in "For the rest of the week"; and the clear choices around different constructions of stanzas. Perhaps most significantly, there is the concise, distilled, image-based language around which the poems "Thought" and "Broken" are



constructed. These last two poems are perhaps the most significant of the section, in that the language therein is arguably the most “poetic” to this point in the book, and perhaps in the book as a whole. Meanwhile, one last language-oriented point to note is the use of the word “cage,” significant for several reasons. First, it clearly echoes the use of the term earlier in the narrative, at the point at which Nick uses the term to describe how he feels about his father’s book. Second, it seems to have a clear connection to the book’s thematic exploration of the tension between freedom and fear: the term cage, by definition, evokes a clear sense of a lack of freedom.

In the meantime, Part 3 also contains the first of the book’s significant turning points - the revelation of the exact state of Nick’s parents’ marriage. This shift in Nick’s world is one that has aftershocks, both positive and negative, throughout the remainder of the story. Meanwhile, it should be noted that these two characters are never actually given a name: they are referred to only by variations on the terms “mother” and “father.”

Finally, Part 3 contains a significant piece of foreshadowing. The reference to the goalie’s toe injury foreshadows later events in the narrative when a significant physical circumstance affects Nick’s plans for participating in the Dallas Cup. A less significant piece of foreshadowing is the on-the-page evocation of the Huckleberry Finn page, which foreshadows the appearance of a similar page in Part 4.

## Discussion Question 1

Which aspects of Part 3 can be seen as reflecting, or developing, the motif of encountering the unexpected?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of Nick’s parents never being named? How do you think this relates to, or reflects on, Nick’s perceptions of them, or his relationships with them?

## Discussion Question 3

In what sense, do you think, is Nick’s experience of his parents’ impending separation like being in a cage?

## Vocabulary

fettuccine, absurd, equation, pronghorn, antelope



## Part 4, p. 68 - 91

### Summary

"Conversation with Mom." Over Nick's favorite dinner, his mom tells him that she knows he has been falling asleep in class (he says he has been daydreaming) and wonders whether soccer is taking up too much time. He says it is not. She suggests the team just gave up. "You mean like you and dad – just gave up?" Nick says (69). The dialogue poem ends there.

"Dear Nick." This poem is a short letter to Nick from April, who is "Sending out a search team / to look for your smile" (70).

"You Want to Talk About April, but Coby's Mind is on the Dallas Cup." In this dialogue poem, Coby urges Nick to just talk to April, and then asks Nick to go play soccer. Nick says he can't: his mom is leaving after dinner.

"Nothing Good About Bye." In this dialogue poem, Nick's mom tells him that she wants him to continue his etiquette lessons, and that she and Nick's father have already said their goodbyes.

"The Way a Door Closes." This poem describes Nick's feelings as he watches his mom leave, comparing his disappearing love and happiness to "twins" (75) and describing the feeling as falling, each letter of the word on its own, descending, angular line.

"The Next Day." As this short poem continues its title, Nick falls asleep in Ms. Hardwick's class.

"In the hallway." As the poem continues its title, Nick sees The Mac, who hands him a piece of paper with most of what is printed there blacked out in the same way as the quoted Huckleberry Finn text (Part 3). That text appears on the next page, suggesting that hope and happiness can be found in reading.

"Conversation with The Mac." In this dialogue poem, in which Nick uses another footnoted word ("ragabash," meaning worthless or rubbish), The Mac encourages Nick to keep reading. Nick asks what is in The Mac's mysterious dragonfly box, but The Mac refuses to tell him.

"First Dinner Without Mom." In another dialogue poem, Nick's father insists that Nick keep learning more words so that he can be extraordinary. Nick protests that he wants to be ordinary. That night, Nick goes to bed to "not sleep / for the third night / in a row" (83).

"I'm Sorry." As this four-line stanza poem continues its title, Nick and Coby banter about which team is going to beat which team in two weeks. Then Coby shows off his scoring skills.





"Hanging out at Coby's." While Coby is getting food, Nick realizes that his mother has been trying to get in touch with him. He feels bad about not responding, but then comments that if anyone should know that sometimes life isn't fair, it is her.

"Conversation." Conversation between Coby and Nick reveals that Coby admires Nick's dad for being famous, while Nick admires Coby's mom for being a good cook. Conversation also reveals that they each dislike their own parents.

"Let's call April, he says." As the poem continues the title, Nick hangs up as April answers because he cannot think of anything to say to her.

"Home Alone." When Nick gets home, he finds that his dad has gone out with friends "which is odd / 'cause you didn't know / he had any" (89). He looks forward to falling asleep watching football, his second favorite sport.

"Why You No Longer Play Football." In this poem, consisting of a series of three-line stanzas, Nick reveals that he no longer plays football because he was once knocked out "for the longest three minutes / of your mom's life" (90).

## Analysis

The emotional qualities of Nick's various conflicts – around his interest in April, around his interest in soccer, around his dislike of reading – take on an additional layer of meaning and depth in this section. This is primarily because while he is dealing with all those conflicts, he is also struggling with experiences of grief and loss, relating to the departure of his mother. There is a sense here, which continues throughout the novel, that all the other problems Nick has in his life are made even more difficult by the constant undertone of pain that results from his parents' separation. What is particularly interesting to note about this aspect of the story is that while the pain is pretty much constant for Nick, it is not constant in the telling of Nick's story: there are only occasional, very vivid or pointed reminders of that situation that come up at often unexpected times or in unexpected ways.

Meanwhile, in the same way as Nick seems to be drifting through his life, the narrative drifts a bit through Part 4. Nothing of significance seems to happen – or rather, the writing about what happens seems to downplay the significance of various events. For example, the actual moment of Nick's mother's departure (note again the lack of an actual name) is described in terms that evoke rather than portray Nick's feelings. The poeticism of the language is the main reason for this: poetry, by definition, evokes rather than outright explains feelings and experiences. A key example of this deepened poeticism is the layered reference to "twins, which can be seen as a clear metaphoric reference of the pain Nick associates with the Eggleston twins.

At the same time as these undercurrents of feeling are moving beneath the surface events of the narrative, there are certain key points to note. The first is the reference to the Dragonfly Box which, here as elsewhere, can be seen as evoking an experience of freedom, or escape from what Nick has described as the "cage" of pain in which he





finds himself. This, in turn, ties this particular theme to another of the book's primary thematic elements – the exploration of the power of language, evoked through Mr. Mac's seemingly deliberate juxtaposition of the freedom-evoking Dragonfly Box with books. Finally, the reference also foreshadows events later in the book, where Nick discovers more information about the Dragonfly Box and its meaning.

One other important piece of foreshadowing is the reference to Nick not communicating with his mother, which foreshadows later circumstances in the narrative in which his attitude and actions, at least in relation to this aspect of their relationship, changes.

## **Discussion Question 1**

In what ways does the narrative in Part 4 develop the book's thematic consideration of the power of language?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How do you think the book's frequent references to Nick's tendency to daydream relate to what you know, at this point, about his story and the book's themes?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is it about what Nick's father wants his son to do that makes him think it will make Nick extraordinary?

## **Vocabulary**

n/a



## Part 5, p. 92 – 112

### Summary

"The next morning." As the poem continues the title, Nick tries to sneak out of the house before his dad can catch him and ask about his homework ...

"The Homework Questions" ... but is surprised to find his dad sitting on the front step, getting ready to go for a run. In this dialogue, Nick's dad tells Nick he has to finish his homework (and call his mother) before he plays any more soccer.

"Texts from Mom." Nick's mom suggests some outrageous reasons why he has not responded to any of her texts or messages.

"Texts to Mom." In a message full of pointed malapropisms, Nick writes "HAY, Mom, why'd you BALE? / Sorry I didn't call you back. I've been feeling // a little HORSE. I / gotta TROT off. Soccer match today. GIDDY-UP" (96).

"Jackpot." In a series of three-line stanzas, while at etiquette class Nick finally gets to dance a waltz with April.

"Insomnia." Nick tries different methods of falling asleep, but cannot manage it. So he "lies there / staring at the ceiling / remembering / those six seconds /with April / and the past six days / without / Mom" (99).

"Standing in the lunch line." As the poem continues the title, Coby asks Nick to get his dad to drive them to school. Nick refuses. Coby then calls out to April, and she looks over.

"Big Trouble." As Nick talks to April, she teases him about scoring a goal in his next game. At that moment, Don Eggleston knocks Nick's tray out of his hand. April speaks sharply to him. Nick describes how Don's laughter makes him "WANNA. SHUT. HIM. UP" (102).

"Stand Up." In this poem of three-line stanzas, Nick tries to use some of the words that he has learned as a result of his father's assignments to fight back, and is excited when it seems that other students are cheering him on. But then he realizes that it is all in his imagination.

"Back to Life." Again in three-line stanzas, Dean Eggleston charges in to back up his brother. April tries to get Nick to leave. Coby charges in to defend Nick. The Egglestons make racist comments about him, and knock him to the ground.

"Do-Over." In a single, long, short-lined stanza, Nick describes what it feels like to keep reliving the incident with the Egglestons, his thoughts revealing his helplessness, and his guilt.



"Consequences." The twins get sent back to the detention center. Coby is suspended for two days. Nothing of consequence happens to Nick.

"The day after." As the poem continues the title, Nick describes how, in the aftermath of the incident, the school principal makes a statement about racism, and the entire school watches a recording of Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

"Conversation." Nick tries to convince his father that he can handle everything that is happening at school, saying he wants to go to do his homework.

"The Last Time You Got into a Fight." As the poem continues the title, in a series of three line stanzas, Nick recalls a grade school fight that he thought he was going to win because he took tae kwon do, but which he lost because he warmed up too hard. After that, he says, he never went back to tae kwon do.

## Analysis

Important elements in this section include the evolution and shift of Nick's relationship with his mom, a shift that seems both positive (in that he actually communicates with her) and negative (in that his initial text seems to be angrily sarcastic). By contrast, Nick's relationship with his father continues to be more confrontational than anything else, with the tension between the two of them here building to a point of game-changing confrontation between them in later poems.

Also in relation to Nick's father, it is interesting to note the image, at the beginning, of Nick's father on the front step, and Nick's comment that this is something unusual. This is an echo of the earlier reference, made almost in passing in Part 4, to the similar strangeness of Nick's father going out with friends. There is a sense here of something going on with Nick's father that Nick does not recognize or understand (here again, it is interesting to note that Nick's father is referred to only by his parental identity, and never by his name). Later in the narrative, Nick asks a question of his father that, like Nick's curiosity about these changes in his father's life, makes a suggestion about what that "something going on" might be.

Other noteworthy points to make in this section include the advancement of Nick's relationship with April, which seems to be proceeding with a slow inevitability – arguably both too slow and not inevitable enough for Nick, but slow enough and inevitable enough to keep the reader engaged. Then there are two related points both connected to experiences and explorations of racism. The first - Coby's encounter with the Egglestons - has a more direct relationship to racism, and is interestingly the only overt reference to race in the narrative. The second, and more indirect, reference to racism occurs in the passing reference to Martin Luther King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech. The story, content, and context of that speech are all worthy of more attention than can be given to them in this analysis, but suffice it to say that the speech, given by one of the most celebrated American civil rights activists of the twentieth Century, if not THE most celebrated activist, was motivated by deeply intense experiences of racism,



and a similarly deep and similarly intense determination to transcend such experiences. The irony is that King advocated non-violent resistance where Coby responds to racist attacks on him with violence – but then that irony is arguably part of the reason why the principal (read: the author) decides to place the reference to the speech here.

The confrontation between Coby and the Egglestons is also part of a series of events in Part 5 that combine into both an important piece of motivation and an important piece of foreshadowing, both of which have to do with Nick's actions at the novel's climax. Other events in this series include the comment about Nick's anger at Don Eggleston's behavior (note the stylistic technique deployed to define the intensity of Nick's feelings), his feelings of guilt associated with not defending himself, and his recollection of the last fight he was involved with. All three motivate, and define, Nick's actions as he finally (later in the narrative) makes the thematically significant choice to face down those who are bullying him, fighting for freedom from that bullying instead of living in fear of it.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How do events later in Part 5 reflect the book's thematic exploration of bullying and fighting back?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is significant, pointed and / or ironic, about the language of the texts Nick sends his mother?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is ironic about the juxtaposition of the two "sixes" in Nick's life – the six seconds with April and the six days without his mother?

## **Vocabulary**

mamba, pummel, stampede, excrement



## Part 6, p. 113 - 135

### Summary

"Caught." In this dialogue poem of three-line stanzas, Ms. Hardwick catches Nick writing instead of listening, and asks him to bring what he has been working on to the front of the classroom.

"The walk to her desk." As the poem continues the title, in a series of four-line stanzas, Nick makes the slow, tortured walk to Ms. Hardwick's desk.

"Then She Smiles." Nick describes being "flummoxed" (which he defines in a footnote as being taken off guard, or confused) as Ms. Hardwick first smiles, then asks him to read the word out to the class. When she asks him what it means, he lies and says he does not know. She then tells the class that their homework is to define the word "limerance" and use it in a sentence. As Nick walks back to his seat, he thinks that Ms. Hardwick might not be that bad, but then "Winnifred raises her hand / and starts / spraying bullets / everywhichway [sic]" (118).

"Limerance." Winnifred, in this dialogue poem, defines limerance as "the experience of being in love with someone / commonly known as a crush / but not any old crush / A. MAJOR. CRUSH" (119). The last stanza of the poem, written in all capitals, is what Nick imagines is going to be written on his tombstone.

"Coby's Back." In this dialogue poem of four-line stanzas, Nick apologizes to Coby for not backing him up in the cafeteria fight. Coby says it is no big deal, even though he is been banned from playing soccer (he can still go to the Dallas Cup, though). As Coby tells Nick to deal the cards ...

"Blackjack in the Library" ... Coby asks Nick to play soccer after class. Nick says he cannot because he has to do some chores for his dad.

"You and Coby." As this dialogue poem continues the title, Nick and Coby continue to play blackjack, whispering about the aftermath of the limerance incident. Coby says he has a note to give to Nick from April, but before Coby can hand it over, they are interrupted by The Mac.

"Not in the Dragonfly Café." In this dialogue poem, **WE DROP IT LIKE IT'S HOT HERE** (the title is bolded). Coby and Nick try to bluff their way through a conversation with The Mac, but as he leaves, he reveals that he saw Coby hide a note under his leg, and tells them to deal with it before Ms. Hardwick finds it. "Blackjack," Coby says (125).

"Note from April." April's note (a short, three line stanza poem) reveals that she thinks "limerance is beautiful" (126), and asks Nick to meet her after class.



"Change of Plans." Nick quickly changes his plans and agrees to play soccer with Coby instead of doing his chores.

"Conversation After Soccer." Nick tries to get Coby to stay with him while he talks to April, but Coby says he has to head home, teasing Nick about not being able to use all the words he is supposed to know.

"Conversation with April." In this dialogue poem, conversation between Nick and April is somewhat awkward at first, but becomes more flowing when Nick uses a word (prestigious) that leads April to reveal that she likes it when he uses words like that. Nick falls silent again when April expresses her sympathy about his parents. As her mom arrives to pick her up, April promises to give Nick a big hug.

"The only thing." As the poem continues the title, Nick says the only thing "better than getting a hug / from April is the PROMISE / of getting a HUG from her" (134).

## Analysis

Part 6 is primarily notable for its development of two of the book's major themes, developments that are tied to simultaneous developments in one or more of the book's many plotlines. The first theme and plot interaction involves the shifts in the relationship between April and Nick, shifts triggered by April's response to Nick's use of words like "limerance" and "prestigious." While there may be some question in some readers' minds as to whether this is entirely believable (how many pre-teen young women are there who become attracted to a young man because of his vocabulary?), there is no question that by shaping the story in this way, the author is reinforcing his central thematic point about the value and power of language – and, indirectly, of reading and education. The point is never directly addressed in the book, but given that statistics show more young men than women dropping out of school at a young age, there is a sense that by showing an attractive young woman attracted to a clearly educated young man, the author is suggesting to what is arguably his target audience (young, athletically inclined men) that spending time with books is worth it.

Meanwhile, the second major theme-and-plot interaction in Part 6 is also tied in with developments in the relationship between Nick and April. This is the theme exploring the tension and relationship between freedom and fear: Nick manages to overcome his fear of saying and doing the wrong thing when it comes to talking with April, an action that enables him to find a new freedom in expressing himself and his feelings with her.

While these developments in theme and plot are unfolding, there are simultaneous developments in the book's exploration of style. There are several occasions in Part 6 in which stylistic choices (that is: how words and phrasing are shaped or emphasized) add weight, depth, or meaning to the moments being described. Perhaps the most engaging, and humorous, of these relate to the events in Ms. Hardwick's class around first the reading of Nick's note (an experience which will be frighteningly familiar to anyone who has had a note confiscated by a teacher) and then Winnifred's interjection



(if there was ever a character whose name seems to have been chosen in order to trigger, or evoke, a feeling about that character, it is Winnifred).

## Discussion Question 1

What moments, or encounters, in Part 6 might be seen as reflecting, or manifesting, the motif of encountering the unexpected?

## Discussion Question 2

What is significant about the different ways the word “blackjack” is used in Part 6? How does it relate, in terms of contrast or echoing, to other ways in which it has been used to this point?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Nick mean when he suggests that the possibility of getting a hug from April is almost as good as ACTUALLY getting one?

## Vocabulary

perpendicular, prestigious, portmanteau



## Part 7, p. 136 - 154

### Summary

"Probability." In this single stanza poem, Nick wonders about the likelihood of living in a city with a large population and running into the two people he least wants to see.

"Boy rides his bike." As Nick rides his bike home from his chat with April, he encounters the Egglestons, who bully him into turning over his bike.

"Kentucky." In this three-line poem, Nick ponders whether it would be worth moving to Kentucky to be with his mother: at least there, he thinks, he might not be bullied any more.

"Breakdown." In this dialogue poem, when he gets home, Nick is confronted by his father for not coming home right after soccer practice. As he is threatened with cancellation of the Dallas trip, Nick shouts at his father for taking away everything (including his mother) that means anything to him, that his life sucks, and that sometimes he wishes he was dead.

"A Good Cry." As he listens to loud rap music in his headphones, Nick erupts in anger, tearing pages out of his books – but not his dad's dictionary "because / even though you're pissed / you're not stupid" (142). He discovers the word "swiven" which, in a footnote, is defined as "a dream or vision in your sleep" (ibid). He then goes to sleep, and has an intensely happy dream, but one that ends with him crying in his mother's arms.

"What are you doing here?" In this dialogue poem / continuation of the title, Nick's mom explains that she drove all night after being called by Nick's dad. Nick insists that he is not going to kill himself in spite of what his mom believes after seeing some of the things he has posted online. She tells him that they are going to go out and have a soccer lesson, but only after he has cleaned up his room.

"1 on 1." In a single stanza, several line poem that has a rap rhythm to it and contains several rhymes, Nick describes again being beaten at soccer by a girl – his mother.

"This morning." In another single stanza poem, but a much shorter one, Nick describes how the morning was normal, even down to being on the pitch with his mother, "until ..." (147)

"Conversation with Mom." In this dialogue poem, Nick's mom teases him about April, tells him firmly to do as his father tells him, and then tells him that she and his father have decided that he is not going to be allowed to travel with his team to a game in New York.





"And Just Like That, Things Are Out of Control Again." In this three line poem, Nick describes how he and his coach try to convince his mom to change her mind, but nothing works.

"Dressed in camouflage sneaks." As the poem continues the title, which describes what The Mac is wearing, Nick describes how The Mac catches him looking for April, and shouts out that she is not there.

"Conversation with The Mac." In this dialogue poem, The Mac encourages Nick to think more charitably of his parents because he, like everyone else, will not get all that many chances to love and be loved.

## Analysis

Part 7 contains another important turning point in Nick's story: the confrontation with his father, which triggers a chain of events that send Nick into an even more conflicted relationship with his parents and with the new situation in his family. The complexities of that relationship and that situation are sketched in clearly here, as the attempts by Nick's mother to reconnect in a positive way vividly contrast with the decision she and his father make to disallow him from the trip to New York. At this point, it is important to note the reference Nick makes in narration to something that he posted online, something that was alarming enough for his mother to return home and for her and his father both to react with alarm. The exact nature of that posting is not revealed here, the reference at this point foreshadowing the revelation in Part 8 of exactly what Nick said.

One last point to note about this sequence of events relates to the comment made by The Mac at the end of this section (bearing in mind that the division of this analysis into "parts" is for the purposes of this analysis only: the poems all flow directly one into the other without chapter divisions). The comment in question is typical of the mentorship and teaching provided by The Mac throughout the novel, and while it may not necessarily have an immediate effect on Nick, his attitudes and his actions, there is a sense that this and other experiences with other characters (but particularly The Mac) are having a cumulative effect on Nick and eventually lead to his overall transformation.

Meanwhile, several of the book's themes are developed further in Part 7. Perhaps most notably, there are developments in the inter-related themes of bullying / fighting back and the relationship between freedom and fear, as Nick has yet another intimidating encounter with the Eggleston twins. There are also clear developments in the book's thematic interest in the power of language, most significantly having to do with the appearance of the term "swiven," a concept that seems to have a lot of appeal for Nick.

The reference to the word "swiven" is also an important piece of foreshadowing, with both the term and the experience showing up at later key point in the narrative. One last piece of foreshadowing is the reference to Nick riding his bicycle, which is significant because Nick's bike plays an important role in a couple of events, important both narratively and thematically, later in the story.



Finally, it is important to note the variations in style in this section – specifically, the inclusion of a rap rhythm / rhyming scheme in “1 on 1.” There is a sense here and throughout the narrative that the author uses rhyme, rhythm, and rap for particular emotional effect.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How do the events and situations of this section explore the book’s thematic interest in the tension between freedom and fear?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you think the author chooses, throughout the book, to emphasize a particular moment or experience with rap-style writing? Why do you think he applies the technique here?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Do you agree or disagree with Mr. Mac’s contention about there being only a few chances to love and be loved? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

n/a



## Part 8, p. 155 – 183

### Summary

"Shrink." In this single-stanza, short-line, no rhyme poem, Nick describes being in a counseling session with his parents and a psychiatrist (shrink) whom he nicknames Dr. Fraud as a satiric reference to the picture of famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud that he has on his wall. The poem reveals that on the night he had the fight with his dad, Nick posted online that he "needed someone / to intervene / between you / and the monsters" (156).

"You miss." As the poem continues the title, Nick describes the things he misses about his life before his mom moved, including family meetings that ended with a group hug. The poem concludes with Nick's statement that neither of his parents is a monster.

"When Mom Starts Crying, Dad Takes her Out, Leaving You Alone with the Shrink." The psychiatrist suggests that there are ways for Nick to face his fears other than fighting.

"Doctor Fraud." When his parents come back in, Nick says that if his parents do not love each other any more, they should not be together. He quotes what The Mac said about people getting only one chance to love, adding that he thinks his parents lost theirs. His parents, in dialogue, protest that they do love each other: they just cannot be together.

"Chimichangas." Dinner at what used to be the family's restaurant is silent, except for the sound of chewing.

"How Did We Get Here?" In a series of four-line stanzas, Nick remembers a series of couples who got divorced because of one partner having sex outside the relationship. He asks his dad whether he cheated, and just as his nervous parents are about to react, someone arrives, "in a T-shirt that says: / I Like Big BOOKS and I Cannot Lie" (163). The T-shirt quote is bolded.

"Introductions." In a series of three-line stanzas, Nick introduces his parents to The Mac, cringing somewhat at his frank references to Nick's recent troubles. The Mac returns to his girlfriend, and Nick is shocked and kind of disgusted to see that it is Ms. Hardwick.

"Alarm Clock." In a three-line poem, Nick oversleeps and asks his mother to drive him to school.

"Cool." In this dialogue poem, conversation with Coby reveals that Nick's mother is leaving later that day, and that he only pretended to over-sleep so he could spend more time with her. Nick and Coby then banter about the best way for Nick to approach April, with Coby ultimately calling Nick a chicken.

"Not Cool." At lunch, Coby yells at April that Nick has something he wants to tell her.



"Bad." Nick describes how, instead of talking to April, he ran to the bathroom and vomited. The final word of the poem is "erupts," on a single line, all caps, starting small but getting bigger and darker.

"After Soccer Practice." In this dialogue poem, Nick and his dad debate whether the still nauseous Nick is actually sick or just needs some rest, and whether Nick should play in an important game the next day.

"You wake up at four a.m." As the poem continues the title, Nick describes waking up and eating junk food.

"The Big Match." Nick describes how the rivalry between his and Coby's teams does not extend to their friendship, although he likes bragging about winning almost more than actually winning.

"Game On." This series of three-line stanzas describes how, during the pre-game coin-toss, the captain of Nick's team calls Coby a racist (anti-Asian) nickname. The poem ends with a single line that acknowledges Coby is "ready to pounce" (178).

"Score." In this three-line poem, Nick describes passing the ball to a forward, "whose / shot stings like wasabi" (179), who then scores.

"Right before halftime." As the poem continues the title, Coby fakes out the name-calling captain and scores. "...when he ties / the game," Nick comments, "even you grin / at your best friend's / genius" (181).

"Guess Who's Back?" At halftime, The Mac visits Nick at the bench, complimenting Coby and saying that Nick does not look well.

"Halftime." "Right after / you glance / at April waving / from the bleachers, / your stomach detonates: / KABOOM! / and you lose it / right there / behind the bench" (183).

## Analysis

A great deal happens in Part 8. First, Nick and his family visit a psychiatrist, in a sequence of poems that contains several important points: Nick's irreverent nicknaming of the psychiatrist; the revelation of exactly what it was that Nick posted online that made his parents so concerned; and the complicated exploration of feelings (particularly love) that results from the conversation with the psychiatrist. There is a sense that as a result of this series of events, Nick comes to a deeper understanding of what it is that he is afraid of in this aspect of his life, and while he does not yet do a great deal to face down that fear, there is also a sense that yet more information and insight is accumulating for / in him as he moves further into both his new life and a new perspective on that life.

Another important, and related, point has to do with what takes place between Nick and his parents at dinner. His direct question about whether his father had an affair is



notable for several reasons. First, it is perhaps a result of accumulated actions taken by his father that seemed to Nick, when they happened, that he is behaving strangely (i.e. his saying that he is going out with friends, his being awake to go running). Another important point to note about this question is that it is never answered – there is no opportunity in the moment that it is raised because of the unexpected appearance of The Mac, but the question is never referred to again elsewhere in the book. The reader is left wondering about this aspect of the story and, incidentally, about several other points raised but not explained. One possible explanation for the relatively frequent deployment of this technique is an evocation of realism: very often, things happen in life that those who experience never fully understand, but on some level just have to accept. Finally, Nick's question can be seen as reflecting a thematically-significant stage in his growth and transformation, in that he feels free enough, at this point, to transcend his fear of asking difficult questions and speak his mind. This can also be seen as evoking two more of the book's themes – its interest in encounters with the unexpected, such as Nick's question, and its overall, underlying evocation of the experience of coming of age, or maturing into the world.

A third particularly significant event occurs at the end of Part 8, with what Nick describes as the “detonation” of his stomach, the true meaning of which is revealed in Part 9 and the repercussions of which define the action and themes of several subsequent parts. A number of moments from earlier poems can be seen as foreshadowing and/or building up to this moment: Nick's nausea around April (which initially appears to be simply nerves), his nausea at dinner, and the comments from Nick's coach during the game. There is the sense here that Nick's physical symptoms seem to be tied to all the psychological and emotional upheaval going on around him: the revelation of the true source of his difficulties in Part 9 revises that impression only slightly.

One final event of significance in this section is the second racism-defined confrontation in the novel to involve Coby, which is particularly noteworthy because of his reaction – specifically, how he again reacts with violence but disguises that violence as part of the game, and also takes out his revenge in an additional, slightly different way – by scoring a spectacular goal. Here again, there is the sense that Nick is seeing different ways of dealing with bullying, itself a thematically significant process. Meanwhile, everything he seems to be learning seems to be defined, on another thematically significant level, by a conquering of fear in a way that he has to this point been unable to do.

There is a significant piece of foreshadowing in this section – specifically, the reference to Nick's missing family meetings that ended with a group hug. The reference foreshadows just such an experience later in the story, one that fuels Nick's belief that his parents are reconciling and that things are going back to the way they were.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Nick “come of age” (i.e. have an experience of becoming more mature) in Part 8?



## Discussion Question 2

Given that wasabi is a term for a spicy Japanese condiment, why is it significant that Nick uses that term to refer to his teammate's shot?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways is the relationship between Coby and Nick a contrast to the relationship Nick believes he has with his parents?

## Vocabulary

tendency, intervene, brochure, adultery, repossess, demolish, corduroy, turtleneck, rivalry, wasabi, nutmeg, demoralize



## Part 9, p. 184 - 205

### Summary

"Coach asks." As the poem continues the title in a dialogue poem, the coach asks whether Nick's okay, and Nick says he is fine.

"Second Half." In this series of two-line stanzas, Nick narrates how his father finally arrives for the second half of the game; how Coby humiliates Nick's captain; and how Nick's gut continues to be upset.

"Nine Minutes Left. Can't This Be Over Already?" In another series of two line stanzas, and as the pain in his gut continues, Nick attempts to make a break for the goal but is held back by Coby. This leads to another confrontation between Coby and Nick's captain, which leaves Coby looking angry.

"Booked." In another series of two-line stanzas, Nick gets another break. He is intercepted by Coby, who tries to kick the ball away but instead connects with Nick's ankle. A series of capitalized words communicates the intensity of the moment: they fall, Nick's ankle "POPS" and his stomach "EXPLODES! / KNOCK. OUT" (191).

"Hospital." The first letters of the lines in this poem are bolded, and spell HOSPITAL. Nick arrives at the hospital with his father, crying in pain, and is taken into the operating room.

"Ankle Sprains." In this series of three-line stanzas, and as the poem continues the title in dialogue, Nick learns from a doctor that his ankle is only sprained, but that his appendix has ruptured and has to be removed immediately.

"Surgery." In this dialogue poem of three-line stanzas, Nick's father tells him that his mother is on her way; Nick's doctors reassure him; and Nick is anesthetized prior to surgery.

"Fact." Nick comments that there are "seventy eight organs / in the human body / but after the appendectomy / you have seventy-seven" (196) which, he says, is about the same number as the texts and messages he finds when he wakes up after the surgery.

"How are you feeling, Nicky?" As this dialogue poem continues its title, Nick tells his parents he feels tired, but fine.

"Bad." In this dialogue poem, Nick learns that he has to be kept in hospital for a few days to keep an eye on an emerging infection. When he mentions that he is playing in an important soccer tournament the following week, everyone in the room falls silent.



"Worse." In this dialogue poem, Nick learns that he will be able to play soccer again in three weeks – which is a problem, because the Dallas Cup tournament is the following week.

"Only." Each of the two-line stanzas in this poem begins with the word ONLY, with several stanzas featuring rhyme. Nick describes the intensity of his feelings as he realizes he is going to miss the Dallas Cup. "ONLY your eyes can't conceal / tear after tear. // ONLY your ship is sinking / and you'll miss all the fun. // ONLY. Three. Weeks. / but Dallas is in one" (200).

"The End." Nick describes how a horse is put down when its leg is broken because "there is no recovery from that type of damage" (201).

"TV Therapy." In this three line poem, Nick reveals that his father is not impressed by the hospital's TV having six sports channels.

"This Sucks." The first letters of the lines in this dialogue poem are bolded, and spell THIS SUCKS. Nick and his dad argue over what he should be doing in the hospital, with Nick's dad giving him his dictionary to read.

"New Rules." "You get five TV minutes / for each page read." "Does it have to be YOUR book?" "It does not. (204).

"Mom kisses you goodbye." In this dialogue poem that continues the title, Nick's mother leaves, accompanied by Nick's father, who tries again to convince him that reading is not a bad thing. Nick is not buying it.

## Analysis

The events of Part 9 confront Nick with the most significant set of challenges he has encountered to this point in the story – his physical illness (the appendix), his injury (the sprained ankle), and the fact that the two combined are rendering him incapable of achieving a long-sought goal (participation in The Dallas Cup). Associated with this element of the story is a related point – the frequency and number of variations on what might be called the book's standard style of poetry. There is a sense here that the author is employing a range of variations to heighten, or emphasize, the sense of importance around these events.

A related point has to do with the sense of energy and momentum that threads through Part 9. In many ways, the sequence of poems at the beginning of this section is the most energized of the book, communicating as they do the sense of physical activity involved in the soccer game, in Nick's injury, and in Nick's journey through treatment. Here it is interesting to note how that energy comes to a slowing, and then to something close to a standstill, as Nick is virtually confined to his bed, and essentially also confined to his grief and frustration about not being able to participate in the Dallas Cup. In fact, the text never actually draws the connection, but it could be argued that Nick is once





again placed in the kind of prison that he has felt placed in several times throughout the narrative to this point.

A final point to note about Part 9 has to do with the reference, in “ONLY,” to Nick feeling like his ship is sinking. This reference foreshadows Nick’s later explorations of his experience (starting in Part 12) in which he develops this metaphoric expression of his experience even further.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does the way the story is told in Part 9 (that is: the style of the poetic writing) manifest the book’s thematic interest in the power of language?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What do you think is the connection between Nick’s reference to a horse being put down and his current situation?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the significance of the specific variations on poetic style in Part 9. Consider changes in format; additions of rhythm, rhyme, or repetition; or other forms different techniques. How does each one create an experience of emphasis or importance?

## **Vocabulary**

feint, otoscope, perforate, appendectomy



## Part 10, p. 206 – 234

### Summary

"The Next Morning." As the poem continues the title, a nurse asks what Nick wants for breakfast. He asks ...

"Breakfast" ... but he does not get what he wants. Although when she brings what he does get, the nurse also brings Coby.

"Conversation With Coby." In this dialogue poem, conversation reveals that Coby saw Nick's parents arguing; that Coby got booked (thrown out of the game) as a result of what happened; and that Coby's dad, who lives far away from his son, is coming to watch Coby play in the Dallas Cup. Coby promises to bring Nick a souvenir.

"Dear Skip." Nick writes a letter to The Mac, asking for him to break him (Nick) out of the hospital and bring a book. The lines of the poem are offset on the page, in a similar manner to the words on the blacked-out pages seen before (Parts 4 and 5).

"Rapprochement." The term rapprochement (which means reconciliation) is footnoted. Nick's narrative poem describes how Nick's dad comforts his mom when she becomes upset about breaking up the family.

"Visitor's Day." As Nick is figuring out how much he has to read to watch a decent amount of television to keep him from being bored, someone comes to visit him.

"Hello Nicholas." As this dialogue poem continues the title, Nick narrates the visit of Ms. Hardwick. They joke about malapropisms, and then Ms. Hardwick reveals the book she brought ("All the Broken Pieces"), saying that The Mac will be by another day. She also says that she has brought someone else to visit. The next guest comes in.

"This has got to be a swiven." In this dialogue poem, Nick describes his reaction to seeing April, who brings a get-well card signed by the class; tells him that she and the class have been reading his father's book; and that she thinks he will enjoy the book Ms. Hardwick gave him, about a boy from Vietnam who got good at playing baseball. She kisses his forehead, and goes.

"You're not really into baseball." As the poem continues the title, Nick comments on how he is prepared to give the book a chance.

"All the Broken Pieces." The poem continues the title as it describes the plot of the book, about a boy from Vietnam adopted into a family in America and learning to play and love baseball. At the end of the poem, Nick realizes he has been reading non-stop, and has accumulated a long stretch of TV watching.

"The Next Day." Just as Nick is eating breakfast, The Mac arrives.



"Conversation with The Mac." In this dialogue poem, consisting of a series of three-line stanzas, The Mac and Nick talk about the book. Conversation reveals that it is all in poetry, and that Nick identifies with its central character, who gets teased and bullied a lot. The Mac asks what he would do if he was treated the same way, and Nick says he would fight back. This sends The Mac into a daydream and then into a nap, "and you're left / wide awake, thinking of / all your broken pieces" (228).

"Read Aloud." In this single stanza, short-lined poem, Nick describes how The Mac wakes up and then reads the book to him aloud.

"He Sounds." As the poem continues the title, in a series of three-line stanzas, Nick describes how, over the next two hours, The Mac reads through right to the end of the book. At the end, Nick says, all the people who had gathered to listen give him (a single line) "a standing ovation" (231).

"Texts to April." In a series of three line stanzas, Nick sends texts to April saying how much he liked the poem and asking what is being read next.

"Text from April." April's text reveals that Nick is going home the next day (and that she is now calling him Nicky, like his mother does. She also sends him a picture of the book she and The Mac's book club are reading next.

## Analysis

The first point to note about Part 10 is its exploration of the friendship between Coby and Nick. There is a sense of real closeness here, of companionship and respect, of camaraderie and compassion. Up to now, Nick has referred, in narration, to how their on-the-field rivalry seems to have no effect on their friendship: the events of the early poems in Part 10 seem to bear this out.

A related point has to do with Coby's revelation that as the result of his on-the-field activities, he was thrown out of the game, or "booked." This is the first clear reference in the book to its title (the term "book" here being used deliberately, given that in the novel, the term has multiple aspects of meaning). There is a sense here that Nick feels as "booked," in terms of his family life, his soccer life, and his relationship-with-April life, as Coby feels in relation to the soccer game. In other words, the specific reference to the term here is an evocation of the general, multi-level, metaphoric value of the term throughout the piece.

A final point to note about Part 10 has to do with what almost seems like a conspiracy to get Nick more involved in, and comfortable in, reading. Ms. Hardwick, April, and The Mac (not to mention the people applauding the latter for his reading) all seem to have almost teamed up to convince Nick that reading is a useful and valuable way for him to be spending his time. While all of this is going on, there is also the sense that this almost-conspiracy seems to be working: Nick's description of getting lost in the story of the book April brings him seems to suggest that all he really needed, in order to become engaged with a book, is a story that he could identify with. All this, in turn, seems to be a



very clear narrative effort to explore the book's core thematic interest in the power of language ... as is, arguably, the fact that April has started calling Nick by the same nickname as his mother does, a situation that, on another level, seems to suggest that the Nick / April relationship has moved to a new level.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the events of Part 10 manifest the motif of encountering the unexpected?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the relationship between Coby and his father seem to parallel that between Nick and his? In what ways do the two relationships seem to contrast?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the story of the book April gives to Nick parallel Nick's story? There are also echoes here of Coby's experience: what are those echoes, and how do they relate to Nick's experience?

## Vocabulary

equine, pigment, amass, courtesy, linger, ovation



## Part 11, p. 235 - 255

### Summary

"Discharged." In this single-stanza, short-line poem, Nick describes how, on the day he is being discharged, he is awake early, thinking of April, re-reading the best parts of the book he just read, and reading his dad's dictionary when his parents arrive.

"Driving Home." In this dialogue poem of a series of three stanzas, Nick and his parents drive home, asking to go to the library and get another book – the one that April told him is being read next in book club.

"Out of the Dust." As this poem continues its title in a single-stanza sequence of short lines, it describes the contents of Nick's new book, *Out of the Dust*, the story of a broken family in dustbowl Oklahoma.

"You dial April's number." As this poem continues its title, Nick describes how, after a series of aborted attempts to call April, he writes down everything he wants to say – but is unprepared when her father answers.

"Phone Conversation." In this dialogue poem, once he gets past April's protective father, Nick and April talk about the book. April calls him on the stilted-ness of his prepared conversation, and then asks him to pick the next book for The Mac's book club. Conversation also reveals that Nick is okay with April calling him Nicky (like his mother does), and that Nick thinks his mom is going to stay.

"Books You Find on Google." This poem consists of a list of titles that Nick finds while doing a Google search. The poems are printed in a variety of fonts and sizes.

"Dreams Come True." In a series of two-line stanzas, Nick describes things that are changing: Ms. Hardwick is leaving, the twins have been kicked out of school, April is allowed to come over for a visit, his family seems back to normal, and he can start soccer again.

"Today, Coby called." As the poem continues the title in a series of two-line stanzas, Nick describes how he put off a visit with Coby, just back from Dallas, because he wants to clean the house – it is the only way, he says, that his mother will allow April over for a visit.

"Knock Knock." In this short, three-line poem, Nick hears a knock at the door and then voices – plural – and realizes that April is not alone.

"Twain." The meaning of this poem's title is footnoted: it means "two." The poem reveals that April has brought the entire book club with her, including Winnifred.



"Nerds and Words." In this dialogue poem in a fragmented variety of stanza lengths, Nick awkwardly listens as the girls in the book club talk about "Out of the Dust." The only point he makes is when he quotes his favorite line from the book, knowing his mother is listening. The line is in reference to the female hero of the book saying that she cannot be her own mother.

"A Long Walk to Water." In this dialogue poem of three line stanzas, Winnifred enthuses about the book that she thinks the club should read next, but April interrupts her, saying that she thinks "Nicky" (250) has a different idea.

"Your Suggestion." In this dialogue poem, Winnifred argues against Nick's suggestion, a contemporary novel that April likes that is written as a series of letters. The poem concludes with April winking at Nick.

"Bye, Nick." As this short dialogue poem continues the title, April says she cannot wait for the next day.

"Family Meeting." This dialogue poem reveals that Nick's mother has asked April to ride horses with her and Nick the next day. As Nick's mother teases him, Nick's father calls a family meeting, which he runs like a trial and eventually rules for the defendant – Nick's mother. The meeting ends with a group hug, and Nick hopes that this way of doing things like the old times will lead to things being the way they used to be.

## Analysis

The first point to note about Part 11 is that the seeming "conspiracy" to get Nick to enjoy reading seems to be working: imagine the surprise of his parents, particularly his father, when Nick actually asks to go to the library. The power of language seems to be working on / with Nick – at least in some ways. Shortly after revealing how Nick is starting to engage with language in the novels he is being asked to read, the narrative includes a humorously contrasting experiment he makes with language – his attempt to pre-plan what he is going to say with April. The thematically significant point of this exchange, this moment, seems to be that language can be (is?) most effective when it is truly connected to something personal, something experienced, something that is more felt than thought. All this can also be seen, in turn, as reflecting or exploring the book's thematic interest in freedom and fear, in that Nick's choice to pre-plan his conversation seems to spring from fear (of saying the wrong thing), while April's response gives him the freedom to express himself more openly.

One last point to note about the conversation between Nick and April here has to do with how Nick's initial conversation with April's father foreshadows a later conversation in which part of the reason for his apparent protectiveness is revealed.

There are several other important elements worth noting in Part 11. One of these is Nick's emerging sense, or realization, of just how many things in his life seem to be changing. What is interesting about this particular aspect of the story is that at the same time as he is having a positive experience of change, he is also having what he sees as



a positive (but ultimately ironic) experience of things going back to what they were, or going back to “same-ness.” This is his experience of the family meeting, an encounter foreshadowed earlier in the narrative (Part 8) and which, at this point, seems to him to be another indication that the negative change in his family life that he had experienced to this point is about to reverse.

Other glanced-at elements of importance include Nick’s refusal to play soccer, which seems to have a multifaceted reasoning behind it. On the one hand, there is the clearer reason for his refusal: his desire to make the house nice for April: on the other hand, there is the more implied reason – that he is still upset by not having been able to go to the Dallas Cup and does not want to be reminded of his not being there.

One final element of significance has to do with the reference to the quote from “Out of the Dust” that Nick finds particularly significant. There is a clear sense here, from the narration of the moment that Nick speaks the quote, that on some level he is thinking about his relationship with his own mother.

## Discussion Question 1

What event in Part 11 can be seen as another manifestation of the motif of encountering the unexpected?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of the book – specifically, its subject matter – chosen for the next subject of the book club? How does it relate to Nick’s experience and perspectives?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the reference Nick makes to the content of “Out of the Dust” – specifically, the quote he refers to about the book’s main character and her feelings about her mother?

## Vocabulary

monsoon, epistolary, blabber, commotion



## Part 12, p. 256 - 284

### Summary

"Text to Coby." In this dialogue poem in a series of two-line stanzas, Coby reveals how the Dallas Cup went (his team lost). Nick reveals he has got a date with April, and Coby congratulates him.

"When April." As the poem continues the title, Nick comments on how beautiful April's backside looked, using a term from his father's dictionary (callipygous), which is footnoted.

"Rock Horse Ranch." In this dialogue poem, Nick teaches April how to groom the horse, and she compliments his intelligence, conversation revealing that he once skipped a grade. Later, as April prepares to ride, Nick's mother makes an arrangement for her to ride with Nick. The poem concludes with the word "blackjack" in big, bold letters.

"Afterward." In this poem without dialogue, Nick pleads to be allowed to go to the mall and a movie with April, and asks his mother to sit several rows away from them.

"You absolutely love." As the poem continues the title, Nick comments on how great it is that April grabs her leg whenever she gets startled.

"Thank You." April thanks Nick for the afternoon, saying how great his parents are. He agrees.

"Later, at Dinner." As this dialogue poem continues the title, there is family banter at the dinner table, and Nick comments that "it feels / like love is back / like home again / just like it's supposed / to feel" (265).

"Conversation with Mom and Dad." In this dialogue poem, Nick learns that his mom is going back to work, and that his parents have decided to get a divorce. After a brief argument, Nick leaves, saying that he's "sorry some horse's needs are more important" than his (267).

"What happens to a dream destroyed?" In this two-line stanza poem, Nick contemplates what happens when a dream comes to an end.

"On the way to the airport." As this dialogue poem continues the title, Nick's mother tries to be positive, gives him some ways to behave, and invites Nick and Coby for a visit. He refuses, saying he and Coby will have soccer-related plans.

"Sinking." In this dialogue poem, Nick's father breaks the silence in the car by saying "... the world is an infinite sea of endless possibility" (270). Nick says he feels like there is a big hole in his ship.





"Conversation with Dr. Fraud." In this dialogue poem with his psychiatrist, Nick describes himself as feeling as though he is drowning. The psychiatrist urges him to find a way to keep his head above water, and suggests that maybe being intelligent is one way, engaging in regular communication with his mother is another.

"Regular Communication." This three-line poem is a message Nick sends to his mother that includes a reference to April saying hello.

"At Miss Quattlebaum's." As the boys and girls at Miss Quattlebaum's line up for a dance, Nick gets up the nerve to ask April out to the eighth grade formal.

"Regular Communication." Nick sends another message to his mom, talking about how tired he is of living on cereal and soda. He again refers to April saying hello.

"After School, You Stop in to See The Mac." In this dialogue poem, Nick gives The Mac a birthday present – a blacked-out poem like the ones seen earlier in Parts 3 and 5. When The Mac says how grateful he is, Nick asks whether he is grateful enough to show him what's inside the Dragonfly Box. The Mac reveals that the box's name is Freedom, but then also reveals that the box needs a key. Finally, he reveals that the box is connected with dragonflies for him "because they're electric, Nick. / Like bolts of lightning // they rocket into the day. / That's how I wanna live. You?" (283) Nick agrees reluctantly. The above-referenced blackout poem then appears, referring to how cool The Mac seems to Nick.

## Analysis

Once again in Part 12, Nick experiences an upsetting turnaround in his family situation; once again, he has interpreted seeing his parents getting along as a sign that they are getting back together, but, once again, he finds himself both disappointed and deeply hurt. This sense of his being wounded is perhaps the main reason that he initially behaves as distantly as he does with his mother. Meanwhile, the experience as a whole can be seen as another manifestation of the book's motif of change emerging from encounters with the unexpected – in this case, the unexpected revelation that in spite of Nick's hopes and understandings, his parents are not getting back together.

Interestingly, the narrative juxtaposes the disappointment and unhappiness arising from this situation with two much more positive experiences. The first is the development of Nick's relationship with April, which seems to be moving even further in a positive, mutually engaged stage. The second is the development of his relationship with The Mac, in which the latter takes on the role of mentor even more vividly and actively. Here it is also important to note the reappearance (after some substantial page time) of the Dragonfly Box, now more than ever (and quite literally) associated with the novel's overall thematic interest in the tension and relationship between freedom and fear. The full nature of that association becomes clear in the following, and final, section of the story.



Another important point to note has to do with the references Nick and his psychotherapist both make about Nick's experience feeling like he is on a sinking ship. This echoes comments made earlier (Part 9), and also echoes comments made by Nick's father about life being an endless sea of possibilities. The sense here is that Nick feels too overwhelmed by the negative aspects of being "at sea" to see the positive aspects that his father is talking about. A related point here is that style, in the form of this particular metaphor, is as thematically significant as substance: that is, the way in which Nick and those around him discuss Nick's feelings and experiences is as connected to thematic explorations of the power of language as the events that lead to those feelings and experiences.

In the middle of all of this, the author drops a very intriguing tidbit of information about Nick's educational history – specifically, the fact that he skipped a grade of school. In general, such a jump happens because a student is academically advanced, highly intelligent, and/or ready for work that is more challenging than the work in the grade into which his or her age would usually place him / her. What is particularly interesting about the reference here is that it can be seen as adding a layer of meaning to Nick's conflict with his father (who seems to be similarly intelligent himself), to Nick's reluctance to read, and his determination to be a success at athletics.

## Discussion Question 1

What events in Part 12 develop the book's thematic exploration of the tension between freedom and fear? How does this development relate to Nick's experience of coming of age?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the implications of Nick's having been put ahead a grade in school? What are the implications of this particular circumstance in terms of his attitudes towards school in general, towards reading in particular, and to his father?

## Discussion Question 3

What is your response to The Mac's observations, or comments, about dragonflies? Do you see or experience them in the same way? What does consideration of The Mac's imagery here remind you of in your own experience.

## Vocabulary

exceptional, articulate, clammy



## Part 13, p. 285 - 314

### Summary

"Playoffs." In this short dialogue poem, April wishes Nick luck on his first game back, and asks him to score a goal for her. He scores two.

"Text from Mom." In this three-line poem, Nick's mother comments that she finds his texts funny, and that she wants to know how the game went.

"Regular Communication." In another three-line poem, Nick sends a text to his mother in which he jokes about failing, but it does not matter: the team won the game.

"Winnifred may be a gadfly." As this three-line poem continues its title, Nick describes how Winnifred's tribute to Ms. Hardwick makes everyone feel emotional. The meaning of gadfly (someone who is annoying) is footnoted.

"Waiting at the Bus Stop When A Police Car Pulls Up." In this dialogue poem, Nick and Coby are picked up on a rainy night by April, who is getting a ride home in her father's police car. April's dad asks Nick questions about "limerance," which he says April wants to get tattooed on her neck. The nervous Nick asks why the car's siren is on.

"Thirty Minutes Later." In another dialogue poem, Nick is dropped off by April and her dad, who turns the car's siren back on when it looks like April might kiss him on the cheek.

"I've Been Thinking." As this three-line stanza dialogue poem continues its title, Nick's father suggests that Nick stop reading the dictionary. Nick laughs, telling his father that he has already finished it. Nick's father suggests they go to dinner at a sports bar.

"Conversation with Dad." In this dialogue poem, conversation between Nick and his dad reveals that he (Nick's dad) was once bullied in school, and that things changed when his own father asked him "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" (295), and then said "The only fight you really have to win is the one against the fear" (296). He then reveals that he tried to fight back with words ("yobbery," defined in a footnote as being a hooligan) and got a black eye, but the bully stayed away after that.

"Hey, Mom." In this three-line poem, Nick texts to his mom that his dad is at a conference and he is having a party.

"Mom Calls Immediately." In this series of three-line stanzas, Nick's mother calls, but he reassures her that his dad is only gone for the day, and they are both fine. He gets ready to head out for his first match back, but then is stopped when someone shouts good morning at him.



"Blue Moon River." In a continuation of the story from the previous poem, The Mac arrives in his new car, which he calls Blue Moon River, partly because it is so rare (like a blue moon) and partly because he (The Mac) is off on a new journey (like is talked about in the song "Moon River"). Nick asks whether The Mac is going with Ms. Hardwick, and The Mac calls him a smart kid. He then takes off, leaving Nick a new book and his bag ...

"Inside the Bag is, Get This, FREEDOM". ... which contains The Mac's dragonfly box. Nick opens it, and sees something even better than what he imagined. "WHOA!" (303).

"Sub." In this three line poem, Nick gets subbed in. "It feels good to run toward / something, and not away" (304).

"After the Game." In this three line poem, Nick sees Coby, April in a swimsuit, and his bike.

"While you and Coby." As this poem of three-line stanzas continues its title, Nick sees the twins bullying another kid. He tells Coby, with whom he has been playing blackjack, that he will be right back.

"HEY DEAN, you scream." As this poem of three-line stanzas continues its title, Nick yells at Dean Eggleston, using the word (yobbery) that his dad used against his bully. As Dean charges him, Nick uses a rhythm he learned in dance class to get out of the way and trip Dean into the pool.

"One Down, One to Go." As this poem of three line stanzas continues the action, Don Eggestrom comes at Nick, who tries to talk himself into standing up to him. He taunts Don and blocks his first punch (with a move remembered from tae kwon do), but then is knocked out by a punch from Don. The last line of the poem fades into the whiteness of the page.

"Ouch!" In this three-line poem, as he regains consciousness, Nick sees Coby, April, and April's mom.

"Freedom." In this dialogue poem, conversation between Nick and Coby reveals that the Egglestons have left; that they left Nick's bike; and that April agreed to go to the dance with Nick. As they get ready to leave, Nick reveals that The Mac gave him the Dragonfly Box, and that its contents were unbelievable. The book ends without revealing what those contents were.

## Analysis

Part 13 contains the book's narrative and thematic climax – that is, the point in the story where its action, themes, and character development all reach their highest points of emotional intensity. That point comes when Nick finally manages to confront the Egglestons, standing up to their bullying. Even though he does not necessarily win the physical side of the conflict, he has won the conflict he has faced within himself



throughout the entire narrative: he has faced down his fears, chosen freedom, used language in a self-empowering way, and ultimately come to a new experience of maturity (i.e. a coming of age) as a result.

There are several experiences earlier in Part 13 that contribute to Nick's ability to finally stand up for himself. Perhaps the most significant is the conversation he has with his father in the sports bar, with his father – in this moment – coming across to both his son and the reader as a fully-fledged human being, more so than at any other point in the narrative (he still is not given a name, though). To Nick, however, it might be even more significant that April seems more interested than ever in continuing and deepening their relationship, a situation they both seem comfortable with in spite of the actions of April's father which, as comic as they initially seem to be, can be read as a true representation of his attitude, a form of teasing, or some combination of both. A final contribution to Nick's choice to fight back against the Egglestons has to do with what he sees inside the Dragonfly Box, but here it is essential to reiterate the point made at the end of the summary of Part 13: that nowhere does the narrative reveal what it is that Nick sees in the box. Whatever it is, it seems to be the final piece in the puzzle of courage (to coin a phrase) that Nick manages to put together in order to face the Eggleston twins.

Nick's climactic confrontation with the Egglestons also brings together several important elements referred to elsewhere in the story. These include Nick's bike (which disappeared earlier and which seems to be as much of a trigger for Nick to confront the Egglestons as anything else); Nick's experience in tae kwon do (which helps him in the confrontation, but only to a point); and, perhaps most surprisingly, Nick's experience in dance class which probably never seemed, to either him or the reader, to have much to offer him or the story other than a way to connect with April.

Throughout all this, the narrative contains some significant stylistic and informational elements. These include the on-the-page portrayal of Nick's losing consciousness (i.e. the text of the poem fading into invisibility); the content of "Blue Moon River" (which contains quotes from the famous song "Moon River"); and the return of emphatic elements like capitalization, spacing, and bolding, all of which evoke the various intensities of Nick's experiences. Here again, theme and story combine, with stylistic technique evoking the book's thematic emphasis on the power of language – or, more specifically, how the power of language can vary and intensify depending on how it is shaped.

Ultimately, the book's ending does what the best endings do: suggest a new beginning. As the story draws to a close, there is a clear sense that Nick has found new confidence and courage. There is also the sense that he has finally started to come to terms with his new family situation, experiencing a sense of freedom and possibility for getting to know his parents in a different, more open way. There is the sense that his relationships with Coby, The Mac, and April will continue to be supportive. Finally, there is the sense that Nick has become more open to other possibilities for meaning and value in his life, possibilities that extend beyond soccer (i.e. the power of his body) and April (i.e. the power of his heart) to include books and reading (i.e. the power of his mind) and courage (i.e. the power of his spirit).



## **Discussion Question 1**

In what ways do the events of this section connect with the book's central themes? How do those connections relate to each other?

## **Discussion Question 2**

When Nick comments that it feels good to run towards something, what does he seem to be referring to?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is significant about the fact that Nick is triggered into fighting the Egglestons by seeing them bully another kid?

## **Vocabulary**

hooligan, raucous, murderous, samurai



# Characters

## Nicholas Hall

Nicholas Hall (Nick) is the book's central character, its protagonist and narrator. He is in middle school (grade eight, going into grade nine), fanatical about soccer (playing it both live and online) and, as the story begins, on the cusp of engaging in some significant transformations in his life. Over the course of the narrative, he engages in what appears to be his first romantic relationship; discovers some painful truths about the state of his parents' marriage; and develops the courage to face both his biggest fears and his biggest hatreds. His overall journey manifests one of the narrative's most important themes, the experience of coming of age – that is, the movement from an experience of innocence and youthfulness to an experience of knowledge and increased maturity.

Over the course of the narrative, as the result of what seems to be several unexpected encounters and as Nick matures into new relationships that he both desires (i.e. with a girl that he likes) and initially rejects (i.e. with his divorcing parents), he manages to overcome powerful fears that color his attitudes towards those encounters and those relationships. He develops the capacity to take action, discovering both physical courage and an enthusiasm for language that had, to this point in his life, either eluded him (in the case of the former) or been downright rejected by him (in the case of the latter). Both these discoveries propel him in the direction of new wisdom and insight, giving him new experiences of freedom in the face of situations that had, in the past, been more of a trigger for fear. What is particularly interesting to note is that these discoveries – of the potential for power in both words and action – shape Nick into someone with intellectual, emotional, and physical strength. He concludes the story on a path towards becoming a more rounded person, someone who is defined at this stage of his relatively young life by increased maturity of body, mind, and spirit and seems to be headed, as he moves forwards, into a life endowed with perspective, courage, and freedom.

## Nick's Mother

Nick's mother (who, like his father, is never named) is funny, firm, and conflicted: she loves her son and wants to be there for him, but at the same time has drifted away from his father and in the direction of following her dreams of working with horses. Her decision to follow those dreams to another part of America triggers a major crisis for her family, and in spite of Nick's desire and hopes for reconciliation, his mother remains firm in her determination to follow her own path. There is a sense that at some point, perhaps once he has recovered from the various traumas he experiences as a result of his mother's departure, that Nick will see at least some value in following her example and live a fully self-defined life.





## Nick's Father

Nick's father, like his mother, is never identified by name. He is described as a linguist (someone with an interest in words, their meanings and their origins), and comes across as a somewhat distant, somewhat intellectual, and somewhat authoritarian figure in Nick's life. There is certainly a sense that Nick favors his mother over his father, and at many points in the narrative, the reader would probably see the reason for that favoritism. Eventually, however, Nick and his father manage to find their way to some common ground, and begin to develop a more positive relationship with each other.

## Coby

Coby is Nick's best friend, his buddy and confidante, and in some ways his protector. Coby comes from a mixed race family of immigrant origin, and faces a degree of racial discrimination as a result of both these identity defining circumstances. But where Nick responds to the bullying he faces with fear, Coby responds with a courage that at times veers into a degree of violence, but which Nick (and the reader) both see as a kind of courage, a standing up for identity that in Nick's case eventually proves inspiring.

## April

April is a young woman with whom Nick goes to school, and with whom he attends a class in etiquette and manners. There is little or no description of her appearance or of the kind of person she is: all the narrative seems to reveal about her is that she finds Nick attractive and tells him so. In that sense, she is as forthright and courageous (and ultimately as inspiring) as Coby. What is particularly interesting about April is that she finds Nick attractive because of his much-resented, somewhat expansive vocabulary. In that sense she is somewhat idealized and perhaps even more functional than a real character, in that her reactions to Nick's knowledge and use of words have more to do with moving the plot and its themes forward than they have to do with a sense of complexity of character and identity.

## Ms. Hardwick

Ms. Hardwick is one of two teachers that play a significant role in Nick's life. Ms. Hardwick teaches Honors English, in which Nick seems to be enrolled only because his father wants him to. He deeply resents being pushed into a place of having to read a lot, and Ms. Hardwick knows it, challenging him to use his intelligence and open himself to other perspectives. He often sees her as pushy and demanding, but her response to reading the note he is writing to April suggests that she has a capacity for compassion and perspective.





## Mr. MacDonald (The Mac)

Mr. MacDonald is the second of two teachers who play an influencing role in Nick's life, and is a very intriguing character in his own right. Mr. Mac used to be an award-winning producer of rap music, but for various reasons (including a career-ending surgery), he became a librarian and teacher. His eccentric love of books and words, plus his evident interest in Nick's mind and well-being, play a key role in moving Nick out of several of his resentments and towards a broader perspective. In particular, Mr. MacDonald's references to, and generosity with, his Dragonfly Box can be seen not only as a particular manifestation of his desire to help Nick grow, but also as a key manifestation of the book's thematic interest in freedom.

## The Eggleston Twins

In clear contrast to the influences of Mr. MacDonald and Ms. Hardwick, both of whom recognize Nick's strengths and encourage him to face his fears, the Eggleston twins (Don and Dean) are among the primary negative influences against which Nick struggles. Judgmental, bullying, and violent, the twins trigger many of Nick's debilitating fears, particularly when it comes to his desired relationship with April. His inability to successfully face up to them troubles him deeply, until late in the narrative and as a result of several new choices and thought processes, he does, in fact, make the effort to face down both the twins and his fear.

## Winnifred

Winnifred is a minor character in the story, a classmate of Nick's whom he finds deeply irritating. A know-it-all and troublemaker, Winnifred seems determined to show herself to the best possible advantage, both showing off her intellect and trying to win the favor of teachers.

## Dr. Fraud

Dr. Fraud (it's a nickname) is the psychiatric counselor that Nick and his parents go to see in an attempt to help Nick deal with the trauma of his parents' separation. The nickname comes as a result of two things: there being a photograph of noted psychiatrist Sigmund Freud on his wall; and Nick's perceptions that he does not need help, and that the doctor's questions are stupid. Eventually, though, Nick's conversations with Dr. Fraud do prove helpful, at least to some degree. They contribute, to a point, to his developing the courage to face down those he feels are attacking him, and/or preventing him from being himself.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Words and Language

The personal transformations experienced by the characters; its thematic emphasis on the importance of language for communication and understanding; and the book's overall poetic sensibility are all defined by representations of language as vital, evolving, and transformative.

### "Weird and Wonderful Words"

For Nick and for the reader, this much-resented dictionary published by Nick's father initially represents an aspect of himself that Nick is determined to downplay, resist, or ignore. Later in the narrative, however, as Nick transforms, his perspectives on the book also transform, leaving both him and the reader engaged, and perhaps even changed, by the way both Nick and his father both experiment with the words in this particular dictionary.

### Soccer

Throughout the narrative, there is a sense that Nick holds onto Soccer ("the beautiful game") and its physical athleticism as much as he does as an act of resistance against the development of his mind upon which his father seems so insistent. When soccer, as a result of an injury and an illness, is no longer much of an option for Nick, he finds himself freer to explore and celebrate his mind and what his father has asked him to learn. At the book's climax, both soccer and language combine to give Nick the courage he needs to face down those who have been bullying him.

### The Dallas Cup

The Dallas Cup, a prestigious soccer tournament that Nick is desperate to participate in, represents an ultimate goal for him. When injury and illness prevent him from participating, however, he finds himself open to new interests. This combines with the book's thematically central interest in exploring language to suggest that the Cup is ultimately more of a distraction from Nick's coming to terms with his true identity.

### Cages

Several times throughout the narrative, Nick refers to his experiences as being similar to being in a cage. These experiences include being told to read and study his father's book, and the intensity of grief and loss as the result of his parents' separation.



## Nick's Bike

When Nick's bike is stolen by the bullying Eggleston twins, it symbolically represents the loss a loss of freedom and identity, both of which Nick regains in the aftermath of finding his bike again, finding enough courage in himself to face down those who stole both his bike and a degree of his freedom to be himself. Therefore, Nick's bike is more symbolically important in its absence, it seems, than in its initial presence.

## Drowning

Several times throughout the narrative, Nick likens the experience of being overwhelmed by sadness or other negative feelings to the experience of drowning. In response to being counseled by a psychiatrist to find ways to keep his head above water, Nick comes to realize that the best way to avoid drowning emotionally is to find the courage and the freedom to face both his feelings and the people / situations responsible for triggering them.

## Dragonflies

Throughout the narrative, dragonflies are referred to (most often by mentoring librarian Mr. MacDonald) in relationship to experiences of freedom. One such reference occurs in the name of the book club Mr. Mac (as he is called) runs at Nick's School, called The Dragonfly Cafe. The second, and more significant, deployment of this symbol is outlined below.

## The Dragonfly Box

The Dragonfly Box is initially owned by Mr. Mac, given the nickname "Freedom," and contains a mysterious "something" that Mr. Mac tells Nick will help him find freedom of his own. While Nick is given the box and reacts with excitement to what he finds inside it, the narrative never explicitly defines what that something is. Neither, as a side note, does it ever define how big the box is, which is an interesting element to consider: after all, how big is freedom?

## "I Have a Dream"

The speech, essentially on the subject of finding courage to fight for freedom from hatred, is a key component of Nick's journey of transformation from being fearful of bullying, change, and rejection into finding the courage to face down the first, embrace the second, and embrace the possibility of acceptance. A recording of this famous speech by American Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. is played at a school assembly in the aftermath of a racism-defined confrontation between the mixed-race Coby and the bullying Eggleston twins.



# Settings

## America

The United States of America is the primary, broad-strokes setting for the novel's action (it is important to note that neither the state nor the urban / rural community in which the action takes place is identified). American culture, which arguably and demonstrably tends to be more interested in manifestations of success other than intellectual, provides an interesting, unspoken subtext to this story of a young, athletic man who wins the girl, has personal success, and grows as a human being as a result of emphasizing reading and learning in his life.

## The Langston Hughes School for the Arts

This is the school attended by protagonist Nick and his friends. The name of the school is noteworthy, in that Langston Hughes is a real-world, African-American poet, known for his experimental use of language and style. As such, there is the sense that the name of the school is something of an homage to, or has a respectful connection to, the book's style (i.e. an experimentation with the use of poetic language) and themes (i.e. its advocacy for the power of language).

## The Hospital

Several important scenes later in the narrative take place in the hospital where Nick receives treatment for his simultaneously ruptured appendix and sprained ankle. There is a sense of almost cocooning about Nick's experiences at the hospital, in that he emerges somewhat transformed from his time there in the same way as a moth emerges transformed from its time in a cocoon.

## Nick's Home

A wide range of scenes takes place in Nick's family home - recrimination and reconciliation, affection and antagonism, celebration and confrontation. It is the anchoring location both for what Nick wants his life to be, and what he experiences it becoming.

## The Present

The book's setting in time is significant if only because of the opportunities it gives the characters to experience different kinds of communication (i.e. texting, emails), and the author to explore different kinds of language used in that communication. It is also a

setting in time in which divorce (such as that experienced by both Nick's and Coby's parents) is something of a way of life for many families.



# Themes and Motifs

## Coming of Age

Over the course of the narrative, protagonist Nicholas Hall has experiences that, in many ways, parallel those of many protagonists of many other coming-of-age stories: illusions are shattered, uncomfortable truths are discovered, and a new, more mature sense of self emerges as a result.

Nick begins the story as something of a child, in that he has a somewhat naïve set of beliefs about himself, about his life, and about the world that he feels relatively confident in. His family life is relatively happy (even with his somewhat routine resentment towards his father); he has discovered something he loves (soccer) that he believes is the most important thing in his life; and he has discovered things that he hates (language and the bullying Eggleston twins) that he believes will never be anything other than a pain. For Nick, there is a sense that what he knows and feels about all three of these aspects of his life is all there is to know: life, however (as a result of a series of experiences outlined below), has other plans.

Over the course of the narrative, Nick discovers that his ideas about himself, about his family, and about his world, are both limited and full of possibility. The story makes him go through the limited-ness, though, before he can get to the possibility. Thus, he discovers the true depths of the tensions between his parents, and is traumatized; he discovers that as much as he wants it, the things he loves will not always be there for him; and he discovers that the things he hates will not always be as frightening to him. In other words, and as is the case with the protagonists of all coming-of-age stories, he becomes more knowledgeable about himself, about his world, and about the world in general, and therefore more mature. By the story's conclusion, he is still young, but he is a little closer to becoming an adult – again, as is the case with the protagonists of virtually any and every coming of age story.

## The Power of Language

The book's thematic interest in the power of language manifests in both its style and its substance – that is, in how the story is told as well as in the story itself. To consider the latter point first: a key aspect of the journey of transformation of protagonist Nick is how he moves from resentment of language (in the form of his father's dictionary and of reading in general) to an enjoyment of it (as a result of the efforts of librarian Mr. Macdonald). He also learns the value of using language as a tool (i.e. in his relationship with April) and as a weapon (i.e. in his battle with the bullying Egglestons).

Also, language becomes an important means of communication with both Nick's estranged parents, his witty texts proving entertaining for his physically distant mother



while his eventual acknowledgement of the value of words proves to be a means of connecting with his emotionally distant father.

Finally, language eventually becomes a key way for Nick to express himself: for much of the narrative, he seems to believe that the only way he has to reveal himself to the world and to other people is through soccer. Eventually, though, as a result of his multi-faceted journey into an acceptance of language's value, he discovers that there is more to him than what he can do with a soccer ball, and more ways to express that.

The book's consideration of language also manifests in the way in which it is told. The primary means of this manifestation is in telling the story not through prose but through poetry which is, by definition, as much about how language is used as it is about what language communicates – as much about the means of telling a story as it is about what that story is. In using poetry as his primary means of revealing the book's characters and narrative (as well as its other themes) the author is reinforcing, perhaps even defining, the thematic contention outlined above – that there is a multitude of ways in which language can be used to understand, interact with, and connect with people and the world.

## Fear and Freedom

One of the ways in which the novel explores, or comments on, the power of language is through its parallel explorations of the relationship between fear and freedom. For much of the narrative, Nick's choices and relationships are defined primarily by fear – fear of what will happen as a result of his parents splitting up, fear of being rejected by April, fear of what the Eggleston twins will do to him when they find out he is interested in April, fear of who he is (or is not) if he cannot play soccer. In fact, much of his journey of transformation over the course of the novel is defined by his fear of taking action to no longer be afraid – in other words, he is afraid of acting out of courage.

Ultimately, though, Nick finds the courage to face his fears and act on his desires in part because of his changed response to, and feelings about, language. Communicating (i.e. using language) with his parents helps him establish new relationships within his family's changed circumstances, while learning that April enjoys his use of language gives Nick the courage to take increasingly significant steps towards developing a relationship with her. At the same time, learning about his father's history with both language and bullies gives him courage to face down those who are bullying him (he even uses the same language his father used when confronting HIS bullies). And finally, with the assistance of the eccentric but wise Mr. MacDonald, Nick learns that while soccer is still desperately important to him, there are other possible ways in which he can define, and reveal, his own identity.

This last is particularly important, and is vividly manifested, in the gift of the Dragonfly Box, given to Nick by Mr. Mac, as the character is known. Mr. Mac has given the box the name of "Freedom" which, on a fundamental level, can be seen as being defined by an absence of fear – or rather, the absence of the effects of fear ... imprisonment, literal or



metaphorical, physical or psychological. At the story's conclusion, by the time Mr. Mac gives Nick the box, he is well on the way to experiencing a new kind of freedom in his life. The gift of the box seals the deal, so to speak, and Nick arrives at a place of security and courage in himself, conquering fear in the name of achieving freedom.

## **Bullying and Fighting Back**

Throughout the narrative, one of the chief obstacles that Nick encounters as he struggles to find both freedom from fear and identity is the bullying he faces at the hands of the Eggleston twins. It could be argued, in fact, that Nick also feels bullied by his father – more specifically, his father's insistence that he (Nick) memorize the words in his (Nick's father's) special dictionary, as well as follow all the rules at home. Nick clearly feels demeaned and devalued by both, as though who he is is under attack from people who are simply trying to be powerful for power's own sake.

One of Nick's struggles over the course of the narrative is to find the courage to fight back, to prove his own self-worth, the value of his identity, and the importance of his feelings and needs. As noted above, one of the ways this happens for him is through his connection with, and insight into the value of, language. Another way this happens is that Nick ultimately comes to realize that the things he values are important enough to him to be communicated about, and acted on – in other words, he gets past his fear and finds the courage and the freedom to be himself. There is something of a healthy cycle of affirmation and realization at work here. As Nick starts to value himself, other people see him doing so and reveal to him how much they find value in both him and in the fact of his finding. This is primarily true of April, but also true of Mr. Mac, Ms. Hardwick, Nick's mom, and to some extent even Nick's dad. External reinforcement then feeds further internal growth, which feeds external reinforcement, and so on and so on until Nick, at the story's conclusion, makes a genuine attempt to fight back against what he sees as a primary source of opposition and repression – the bullying Eggleston twins.

Here it is important to note that Nick is not the only character who gets bullied, and who has an experience of fighting back. Nick's buddy Coby is also on the receiving end of bullying, from both the Eggleston twins and the captain of Nick's soccer team. In Coby's case, the bullying has racist overtones, while in the case of both attacks, Coby has it in him, immediately and accessibly, to fight back. In this he is simultaneously an inspiration and an intimidation to Nick – an inspiration of who he would like to be, and an intimidation in that he (Nick) believes that he will never be as strong or as powerful as his best friend. By the story's conclusion, however, he has learned that he is more like Coby than he originally thought.

## **Encountering the Unexpected**

One of the additional ways in which Nick comes of age over the course of the narrative is that as a result of encountering several unexpected, potentially traumatizing circumstances, he learns that he is capable of handling more, learning more, and





becoming more than he ever thought was possible. There are several such circumstances that take place over the course of the story, forming a motif (repeated image) that suggests, to both Nick and the reader, that opportunity to grow and transform comes in at least partial response to that which seems to come out of nowhere.

There are three main manifestations of this motif in the story. The first is how Nick is forced into a series of self-transformative reactions and choices as the result of the unexpected turn taken in the relationship between his parents – or rather, the mostly unexpected turn of events. There is the clear sense, even at the story's beginning, that Nick senses all is not right between his mother and father. What does come as a surprise, though, is the clear and definite way in which that not-right-ness evolves into choices that initially traumatize Nick, upsetting him for quite some time but eventually leading him into a place of self-expansion and moving forward with a somewhat scarred, but more open, heart.

The second main manifestation of this motif is the incident of Nick's appendix – specifically, the perforation that leads to him being hospitalized, experiencing surgery, and ultimately missing an event (the Dallas Cup) that he had, to that point, believed was the most important thing that could ever happen to him. There is a similarly clear sense here that as a result of the issue with the appendix, Nick is again placed in a position, albeit reluctantly, of coming to a series of greater understandings about himself and his relationships, with people and with words.

The third point at which this motif appears is at the story's climax, the encounter between Nick and the Eggleston twins following Nick's return to the soccer field. For some time prior to this encounter, Nick (and the reader) had been under the impression that the twins were safely out of the way. Their unexpected appearance at the party, however, proves to have the same sort of effect on Nick as the other unexpected encounters he has: it becomes an opportunity for him to discover more of himself, to reveal more of himself, and to manifest the transformations in himself that have taken him away from fear and towards freedom, away from childhood and into a greater sense of maturity.

# Styles

## Point of View

In terms of narrative point of view, the story is told from the first-person perspective of narrator and protagonist Nicholas (Nick) Hall. Events, situations, and conversations are all portrayed as he experiences them and reacts to them, meaning that the actions and intentions of other characters are communicated through the filter of his perceptions and interpretations. This limited point of view brings the reader's focus and intention tightly into, and onto, Nick's story. A related point is that while there are occasional diversions into past tense (i.e. when Nick describes events, situations, and relationships that took place before the events of the main narrative line), for the most part, the story is told in present tense, which adds another layer of immediacy and connection to the reader's engagement with Nick's experiences.

In terms of stylistic point of view, the main point to note has to do with the fact that the narrative unfolds in a series (more than 250) poems, some as short as a few lines, others as long as a few pages. This point, in turn, ties in with the third component of the book's point of view – specifically, its thematic perspectives, which are primarily defined by its exploration of the power of language. The book's use of poetry as its primary narrative vocabulary introduces the reader to the idea that there are ways to use language in storytelling other than what might be expected (i.e. straightforward prose). At the same time, occasional inclusions of rap-style writing suggests that poetic writing does not have to feel old, stuffy, or unconnected to the experiences of young people like Nick and the other central characters. The narrative fact that Nick comes to his own realization of the power and value of language, after a long period of fairly intense resistance to the idea, reinforces and embodies this thematic point of view, itself reinforced by the book's stylistic point of view.

## Language and Meaning

The main point to note about the book's use of language has to do with the fact that it is written in blank verse, a term for a type of poetry defined by language-rich imagery but does not include rhyme or a particular sense of rhythm as components of its poetic style. There are occasional poems (such as the very first poem in the story) that include rhyme, some of which include rhyme within the context of a rap-like rhythm. For the most part, though, the poetry lacks a particular, consistent line-by-line rhythmic structure.

The point is not made to suggest that the poems making up the narrative are entirely without form: on the contrary, there is the very clear sense, throughout the book, that stanza structure (i.e. groupings of lines) and line endings (i.e. where sentences or thoughts break and move on to the next line) have been very clearly chosen and shaped to reflect a particular experience. For example, there are several poems that



follow a particular pattern of stanza construction and then break that pattern to end with a single line. This draws attention to the meaning and value of that line which, on the occasions that this structural technique is used, reflects the meaning of the poem and the particular meaning, to Nick, and / or his situation, and / or the event described in the poem.

Meanwhile, other poetic techniques add other layers of meaning to the narrative. Some poems use the letters of a particular word as the first letters of a series of poetic lines; others contain a seemingly random series of bolded letters that, when put together, likewise spell out a particular word; still others contain other typographic flourishes (i.e. bolding, change in font, spacing) that add depth and meaning to the moment being portrayed. Ultimately, there is the clear sense that throughout the poem, language is not just written: it is physically and visually shaped in order to reinforce meaning, to add layers of meaning, or to lead the reader to consider meaning.

One last point to note about the use of language in this book is that Nick constantly refers to himself in the third person as "you." There is a sense here that in making this stylistic choice, Nick is experiencing a certain sense of distance from himself, one that shifts as the narrative progresses and his choices become less defined by fear and attitude.

## Structure

On one level, the overall narrative's structure is fairly straightforward – that is, it moves from beginning through middle to an end, cause leading to effect, action leading to reaction, in a linear pattern. In that big-picture sense, its structure is similar to a more traditional prose novel, taking a character through a need-driven pursuit of a particular goal, encountering a series of obstacles as that pursuit continues, and emerging at the end of the story having been changed, or transformed, by the process.

On another level, however, the way in which that journey is structurally portrayed is perhaps the book's most unique, and engaging feature. As noted above, and instead of what might be seen as a more traditional chapter-by-chapter breakdown of events, the story is told in a series of poems of varying lengths. Both those events and Nick's reactions to them are revealed in poetry that is sometimes narrative, sometimes contemplative, and almost entirely defined by structural elements that reinforce meaning. Those elements range include line structure (sometimes lines are as short as one or two words, sometimes they are quite long) and stanza structure. In terms of the former, poems are frequently broken down into line groupings of three or four: just as frequently, there are no stanza breaks at all, only a string of lines of varying lengths. Again, and as noted above, there are frequently poems that follow a particular structural pattern only to break that pattern in order to make, or reinforce, a particular narrative or thematic point.

Finally, it is important to note the book's use of titles for each of the poems. In several cases, the title is actually the first line of the poem, with the actual text of the poem

continuing where the title leaves off. At the same time, there are also poems in which title and poem are completely separate, with the title giving a sense of meaning, context, or subtext, to what the words of the poem are saying.



## Quotes

Ninth grade is five months from now / when you and Coby have vowed / to have a girlfriend or die.

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 2)

**Importance:** This brief quote outlines an important underlying element in Nick's perspective on himself and his personal goals as the narrative begins.

... and now / the most dangerous player / on the rival soccer club / also happens to be / your best friend."

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 2)

**Importance:** This quote sets up a key dynamic in the personal friendship / rivalry between Nick and Coby, Nick's his best friend and confidante.

You're thinking / of April-Dallas-Anything / to avoid / reading // the last few dreadful pages / of this dreadful book / ... / You're in a brick-hard / cushion-less seat. / Exercising. Your eyes. / Bored.

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 2)

**Importance:** This quote sums up the complexity of situations Nick experiences throughout the novel: his friendship-slash-rivalry with Coby, his desperate attraction to April, his love of soccer, and his deep resentment of his father's influence on his life.

Do me a favor and stop complaining about trying to be excellent."

-- Nick's Father (Part 2)

**Importance:** This terse comment sums up Nick's father's reasons for being so insistent on Nick's attention to words, language, and learning.

So when he gets all geeked / about his nerdy book club / or breaks into some random rap / in the middle of a conversation / most people smile or clap / because we're all just happy / The Mac's still alive.

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 3)

**Importance:** This quote sums up Nick's positive regard for the character who seems to be more of a positive, affirming mentor for him than his own, much-resented father: Mr. MacDonald, the eccentric, compassionate, outspoken school librarian.

... it's like a bombshell / drops / right in the center / of your heart / and splatters / all across your life."

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 3)

**Importance:** In one of the book's more overtly poetic sections, Nick describes how it feels to learn that his parents are getting a divorce.



From your window / you watch / love / and happiness / sink / like twins / in quicksand / when / she drives / away.

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 4)

**Importance:** In another piece of poetic narration (which seems to be used for moments of deep feeling), Nick describes his feelings as he watches his mother drive away.

You get one chance to love, to be loved, Nick. If you're lucky, maybe two."

-- The Mac (Mr. MacDonald) (Part 7)

**Importance:** This quote becomes something of a motif later in the narrative, something that Nick hangs his thought processes and decision making processes on - the idea that opportunities to find the best kind of love are ultimately, and inevitably, limited.

You clench your fist, as if / that's gonna stop the ocean / of fear that's galloping toward you. // Count backwards from ten, another doctor says / And before you completely drown / everything goes black."

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 9)

**Importance:** As this quote explores the recurring motif / image of Nick's fear seeming to him as overwhelming as the powerful sea, it also transitions Nick into his experience of being anesthetized for surgery.

...and she kisses you goodbye on the forehead / more like a grandmother would, but that's not going to / stop you from never washing your head. Ever.

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 10)

**Importance:** This quote is made in reference to Nick being kissed for the first time (albeit just on the forehead) by the girl he finds deeply attractive.

... the poems were cool. // The best ones were like bombs / and when all the right words // came together / it was like an explosion."

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 10)

**Importance:** Nick's newly emergent love of reading, words, and language manifests in this quote, which is also a key manifestation of the book's centrally thematic celebration of language.

Does it sink / like a wrecked ship in the sea? // Or wade in the water / like a boy overboard? // Maybe it just floats around and around // or does it drown?

-- Narrator (Nick) (Part 12)

**Importance:** In this quote, "it" refers to a dream that has been destroyed, explored in a continuation of previous likenings of overwhelming feelings of loss to boats and/or the sea.