

The Book of Everything Study Guide

The Book of Everything by Guus Kuijer

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Plot Summary

The Book of Everything by Guus Kuijer is a young adult novel that revolves around the life of nine-year-old Thomas Klopper, who is living in Amsterdam Netherlands after World War II. Thomas lives with his angry, religious father; his beloved mother, who is beaten often by her husband; and his sister, Margot.

Thomas is blessed with the ability to "see" things that no one else can see. He is visited often by Jesus, who speaks to Thomas about his life. He sees hailstorms and he witnesses some of the five plagues mentioned in the Bible's Old Testament, portions of which Father reads aloud to the family each night. At the same time, Thomas repeats to himself that "God does not exist" when he is punished by his father, who strikes him repeatedly with a wooden spoon on his bare bottom. At home, Thomas witnesses frequent angry outbursts and domestic violence on a regular basis.

Thomas' only hope for a change in his family circumstances comes from an unlikely source: Mrs. van Amersfoort, the next-door neighbor believed by neighborhood children to be a witch. The eccentric old woman invites Thomas into her home one day, and he learns that her late husband was executed by the Nazis during World War II. She is kind to Thomas, and seems to know about the violence in his home. She lends him books to read, asks him to read poetry aloud to her, and tells him not to be frightened. She later writes a note to Thomas' father, warning him that she knows what goes on in the Klopper home.

With the help of Mrs. van Amersfoort, the family holds a read-aloud club meeting at the Klopper home - a decision that has Thomas worried because they never have guests in their home. Father has no idea that the meeting will be held, but Thomas, Margot, and Mother all know about it in advance. A group of women arrive for the meeting, including Mrs. van Amersfoort, and they applaud Thomas when he reads poetry out loud to them. The women also bring Mrs. Van Amersfoort's gramophone with them, and play classical and jazz music by Louis Armstrong.

When Father calls the music "heathenish" and complains that the poetry sounds like "empty vessels," he is chastised by one of the women in the group. Father angrily retreats to his study, outnumbered by a group of women who are clearly there to support and love Thomas, Mother, and Margot. The bond that was secretly formed will continue to protect the family from further harm.

Jesus appears to Thomas that night and tells him that he cannot help Thomas' father. Thomas realizes at that point that some people can't be redeemed because of their anger and unhappiness. But it's clear that because of their friends, the family circumstances will now change for the better.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Thomas is introduced as a boy who "saw things no one else could see." He sees hailstorms and the leaves falling from trees, even though his mother doesn't believe him. Thomas also writes about everything he sees and experiences in a journal that he calls The Book of Everything.

When Thomas asks at dinner what books are about, his stern father answers that "all important books are about God." But Mother quietly points out that books "are about God as well as about love." Thomas senses that his mother is unhappy, and wants to comfort her, but can only wish that "God will punish Father terribly, with bubonic plague or something."

While walking home one day, Thomas meets Eliza, a beautiful girl with an artificial leg made of leather and four missing fingers on her hand. They have a brief conversation about why tropical fish are swimming in the nearby canal, and Thomas is struck not only by her beauty but by her ability to quickly understand him and see what he sees around him.

The Klopper family attends a small church service that is actually held in someone's home. Their religion forbids them to take the tram to work, so they walk there. Thomas describes the church as being filled with elderly people. While in church, Thomas mistakes the singing by the congregation and responds with these words: "Musical Lord, forgive our miserable singing."

During dinner that evening, Thomas's father is angry about something and asks him to stand and sing what he sang in church. When his father becomes angry, Thomas's mother tries to defend him and is slapped across the face by her husband.

In his bedroom, Thomas is beaten on his bare bottom by his father, who uses a wooden spoon. Each time he is struck, Thomas thinks to himself that "God does not exist." His father forces him to memorize the correct church response, "Merciful Lord, forgive us, miserable sinners."

Thomas meets his next-door neighbor, Mrs. van Amersfoort, when she protects him from a well-known mean dog, which the neighborhood children have nicknamed Bottombiter. Although Thomas believed that Mrs. van Amersfoort was a witch, as many of the neighborhood children believed, she invites him into her house after shielding him from the dog. Her home is cluttered with books, magazines and newspapers.

After offering him a cordial to drink, Mrs. van Amersfoort tells Thomas that her husband was executed by the Nazis during World War II because he active in the Resistance during the war. She plays Beethoven on her gramophone, and then loans a book, Emil



and the Detectives, to Thomas. She tells him not to be afraid anymore, and he says he is no longer afraid of witches.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Thomas lives in fear of his father, an angry and isolated man. Father uses religion as a means of establishing dominance over his children and his wife and instilling fear in them. He is a bully whose wife cowers in fear and whose children pray for his demise and punishment.

Still a young boy, Thomas poignantly writes in his journal, *The Book of Everything*, that, "When I grow up, I'm going to be happy."

Thomas begins to lose his own faith, repeating to himself while his father beats him: "God does not exist." Thomas can't understand the disconnect between how his Father behaves and what he has learned from the Bible. But Thomas is also blessed with a gift to see and experience things that other people, with the exception of his friend Eliza and neighbor Mrs. Van Amersfoort, can't see. Thomas sees hailstorms and leaves "being ripped" from trees in the middle of the summer. He speaks to Jesus, as a way of holding on to what little belief in God he still has.

The fundamental, Calvinistic life imposed by Father is evident in the small church service the family attends, held in a home instead of a real house of worship, where the elderly congregants outnumber the young. The family is not allowed to take the tram to church, so they walk. "Sunday is the only day you have to push like a handcart," Thomas writes wearily in *The Book of Everything*. "The other days roll down the bridge by themselves." Thomas is bored during the service and misunderstands the words to a litany the congregation sings.

When they return from church, Father is angry at Thomas for getting the words wrong and clearly intends to punish him. When Mother steps in to defend her son, Father slaps her across the face and marches Thomas upstairs. There, he beats him repeatedly with a wooden spoon. These may be the actions of a religious man, but not of a kind man. And Thomas wants God to punish Father with the plagues of Egypt, because of all the times he has already beaten Thomas' mother.

At the end of Chapter 1, Thomas notes how his prayers remain unanswered. "God was silent in every language. The angels tried to dry their tears, but their handkerchiefs were so soaked through that it started raining even in the deserts."

Thomas looks to the outside world for some respite from the sadness he experiences, and meets Eliza, a disabled girl with a bright spirit. He is immediately struck by her beauty and the brief conversation they have about tropical fish swimming in the canals and about "crocodiles living in the sewer." After meeting her, Thomas says, "She is lovely. And she understands what I see." He also finds an important friend in Mrs. van Amersfoort, the eccentric "witch" who invites him into her home, plays Beethoven on her gramophone while their chairs magically rise off the floor, and lends him a book to read,



Emil and the Detectives. She tells Thomas that the book is about "a boy who does not want to be afraid, and fights the injustice in the world."

In Eliza and Mrs. van Amersfoort, Thomas finds valuable allies in his quiet battle with Father, violence, and the nearly constant sadness enveloping his family.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Thomas returns home, and Father asks him where he got the book, *Emil and the Detectives*. Father tells Thomas that Mrs. van Amersfoort is a Communist, that the author of *Emil and the Detectives* is a Communist, and orders him to return the book and not to visit her again. But when Mother is tucking Thomas in to bed that night, she tells him that Mrs. van Amersfoort and her husband helped to save people during the war, and that he could continue to visit her as long as Father did not learn about it.

During dinner, Thomas is "visited" by Jesus by seeing him "in the dark behind his eyelids." Jesus asks Thomas, "How's it going, my boy?" When Thomas tells Jesus that his father hits his mother, Jesus replies, "Well, I'll be! Has he gone completely off his head?" That expression, and others Jesus uses in his informal language with Thomas, are the exact words that some of Thomas' relatives use, including his Aunt Pie and his Grandfather.

Thomas mails a love letter to Eliza, and worries about what he will do when he sees her again. When he sees that a letter has arrived at his home a few days later, Thomas grabs it, assuming it might be from Eliza. But instead, it's a letter addressed to his Father from Mrs. van Amersfoort. Thomas considers the letter "a national disaster" that could "only lead to trouble." He runs out of the house with the letter, and breathlessly thinks about tearing it up and throwing it away. But he decides to open the letter, and when he does, he sees one line: "A man who hits his wife dishonors himself." Thomas decides to bury the letter in a nearby park, but instead, buries the envelope and saves the letter. He later pins it behind the pocket of his shirt, and considers it a "magic spell" from Mrs. van Amersfoort, and a form of protection.

On his return home, Thomas runs into Eliza, who tells him his letter was lovely. She kisses him on the cheek, and he is elated. He decides that he should write more letters to people, because, "That cheers them up. Then they like me."

At dinner, Father begins reading the Old Testament's story of the plagues of Egypt, in which God asks Moses to perform a series of plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In the first plague, Moses turns the waters of the Nile red with blood, which will kill all the fishes in the river.

On a second visit to Mrs. van Amersfoort's home, Thomas asks her if he can take her bottle of red cordial home with him, and she says yes. She asks Thomas if he is ever beaten at home. Although he wants to tell her the truth, he says, "Of course not." She loans him another book, *Alone in the World*, and tells him "I'll lend it to you precisely because you're not alone in the world."



Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Father's paranoia and dominance over the family is fleshed out in Chapters 3 and 4, where it's clear that he controls the family's finances, going over Mother's "housekeeping book," a list of all family expenses, with her. When Thomas returns home with the book, Father forbids him to visit Mrs. van Amersfoort and calls their neighbor a Communist. "When the Russians come, she'll be out on the sidewalk cheering," he says. "And all of us Christians will be slaves."

In contrast, Mother is trying her best to enjoy the outside world and to encourage her son to do the same. In the same conversation about Mrs. van Amersfoort, Mother suddenly hears Beethoven being played by a neighbor, talking and laughing from other homes and yards. She says, "Isn't that lovely. Beethoven..." When Thomas notes that he met Mrs. van Amersfoort by helping her carry her bags, his mother responds kindly. "That was nice of you! That poor woman is so alone."

Mother clearly loves Thomas, tries to protect him, and even permits him to defy his father's wishes. When she puts him to bed, she tells Thomas that Mrs. van Amersfoort and her husband saved other people during the war, at great risk to themselves. Mother admires Mrs. van Amersfoort and tells Thomas, "I'll always let you visit her, but just make sure Papa doesn't notice." When Thomas asks Mother if she is happy, she responds by saying, "Yes, my own boy, because you make me happy." Thomas thinks about what she said, and concludes that "something was not quite right, but he couldn't quite work out what." Although she is unable to defy Father herself, she encourages her son to do so, and to grow up with an open mind and a kind heart.

Although to Thomas, Margot is nothing more than a nosy older sister, the reader senses that she is goading Father, particularly during dinner in Chapter 3. As Father cuts the meat, Margot notes how sharp the knife that Father uses is. "It cuts clean through everything, no matter how tough," she says. "Rip, rip right through it." Thomas notices that Margot's eyes "glisten" as she says this, and that Father cuts himself the largest piece of meat at dinner.

A turning point in the story takes place when Thomas discovers the letter written to Father from Mrs. van Amersfoort. Although he is horrified by his own actions, Thomas decides to open the letter and read it to avoid "a belting" from Father. Thomas eventually decides to pin the letter inside the pocket of his shirt, believing that if Mrs. van Amersfoort is a witch, the letter will act as a magic spell. Thomas has chosen to keep the letter over his heart, possibly to protect him and Mother. Not only does Mrs. van Amersfoort know the family's dark secret, but Thomas has also told Jesus, in a slim hope that things might change.

But he is still shocked, because the beatings and abuse were always a family secret. "So she knew! He flushed with shame. She had discovered the great secret. There were secrets you could safely pass on. But this was a secret nobody must know, because it was awful." Thomas, Mother, and Margot were all so ashamed by the abuse taking place in their home that it had to be kept from the rest of the world.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

During dinner one evening, Margot points out that the water in Thomas's aquarium had turned red, like the Nile River in Father's Bible readings. Father suspects that it is a trick performed by Thomas and insists that it should be ignored and that the fish should die. After dinner, Mother and Thomas sneak into the living room and use a hose to siphon the water out of the aquarium, but Father confronts them. He slaps Mother and she fights back, punching him in the arms. But she loses the fight and crumples to the floor, crying and bleeding.

At that moment, the door bell rings. Father sends Mother upstairs, and answers the door. Mrs. van Amersfoort steps inside and asks to borrow a cup of sugar. Father nervously gets her sugar, and she asks about his wife. Then she says hello to Thomas, advising him to "Give your Mother a kiss for me."

When she leaves, Father falls to his knees and prays for forgiveness for losing his temper. He reaches out to Thomas, but the boy backs away and goes upstairs to his mother's room. He sees her lying on the bed, and kisses her on the cheek. She tells him not to act out "the plagues of Egypt" anymore. In bed that night, Thomas "sees" Jesus and has a conversation with him about his Father and Mother, angry that Jesus has not intervened or listened to his prayers to be happy. Jesus writes this message in sand he sees around him: "I am pleased that you exist, Thomas!"

Thomas wakes the next morning and sees another of the plagues with his own eyes - frogs taking over the streets around his house. He speaks to the frogs and asks them to leave, which they do. Margot sees him and they sit on the stairs to talk. Thomas shows his sister the letter sent by Mrs. van Amersfoort, but when she asks who wrote it, he won't tell her. Margot says that their Father should see the letter sometime, and Thomas agrees, but wants to choose the right moment.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

At this point in the story, things begin to unravel for Father and there might be a glimmer of hope for Thomas, Margot and Mother. But Mother, in particular, first must pay the price of another beating.

Thomas, who is only nine, has apparently poured Mrs. van Amersfoort's cordial into the family's fish tank as a joke or an experiment. As the family sits down to dinner, Margot points to the red-colored water in the tank, saying, "The water has turned into blood!" Margot calls it "a miracle," but Father is not amused and it quickly becomes clear that he will not allow the water to be changed to save the fish. "The water stays there," he says, noting that in the Bible, "there were mockers, too." When Mother suggests that



maybe a germ contaminated the water, Father says that "I think the germ sits at the table here. A human germ who thinks it is amusing to mock God's omnipotence."

After dinner, when Mother and Thomas try and siphon the red water out of the aquarium, Father confronts them and hits Mother in the face. To Thomas' shock, Mother begins hitting him back and screaming. But she is no match for her husband, who punches her until she falls to the ground. Margot helplessly shouts to her father that "The Bible was written by people. By people!" Although Thomas is too young to fight back, both Mother and Margot at least make the attempt.

The tortured family has a friend, who rings the doorbell in the midst of this horrifying scene. When Mrs. van Amersfoort appears at the foot of the stairs to their apartment, claiming to need a cup of sugar, it's clear that she's really there to break up the fighting she heard. Instead of waiting at the bottom of the stairs, this brave neighbor climbs her way into the apartment to get a look around. For the first time, Thomas notices that "Papa is scared." Mrs. van Amersfoort looks directly at Thomas and says, "Give your mother a kiss for me." Clearly, Mrs. van Amersfoort hears the squabbles and abuse that take place in the house, and intends to intervene. The most amazing thing, from Thomas' young point of view, is that Mrs. van Amersfoort is not the least bit afraid of his father, and that his father seems more afraid — of being unmasked. Although his father falls to his knees and prays to God for forgiveness when Mrs. van Amersfoort leaves, Thomas feels "not the slightest pity."

Jesus visits Thomas that night, and the angry boy tells him, "You're not being all that much use." But the amused Jesus writes the message in the sand to Thomas, reassuring him that he has a reason to exist and should not give up. He lays his hand on Thomas' head and tells him, "You are strong because you are kind, will you remember that? All of us up here are proud of you." Thomas now knows that two sources of support — Jesus and Mrs. van Amersfoort — are watching over the family.

Thomas is shocked when he wakes to see that "the streets and the sidewalks were covered in greenish that moved — hundreds of frogs, which was the second of the plagues read by Father at dinner on the night of the aquarium incident. But as the frogs covered his own doorstep and rattled his front door, Thomas speaks to the frogs, remembering that Remi, the boy in the book *Alone in the World*, had spoken to animals all the time. The frogs withdrew. Immediately after this miracle, Thomas and Margot sit on the steps together and Thomas shows his sister the letter written to Father by Mrs. van Amersfoort. Margot agrees with what the letter says, and insists that they need to find a way to get their father to read those words.

Thomas now has an strong ally in his sister, who urges him to come up with a way that Father can see the note from Mrs. van Amersfoort. Gradually, the more the family speaks about their situation and shares it with others, the stronger they can become.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Aunt Pie, Father's sister-in-law, arrives at the Klopper home, looking as if she had been crying. She announces to the family that she has been hit by her husband, Benno, for wearing slacks. She asks Father to intervene, because he is Benno's older brother. But Father tells her that "God has ordained" that women should wear dresses and that men should wear trousers. Aunt Pie notices the bump on Mother's nose and asks her about it. Then she realizes that Father also beats Thomas's mother. Aunt Pie leaves, but first tells Father that he is "as big a coward as your brother."

On his next visit with Mrs. van Amersfoort, she asks Thomas how he liked the frogs. He realizes then that she is "a powerful witch." She also asks Thomas to read some children's poems out loud to her and as he does this, he watches her turn from an old woman into a young girl. "Mrs. van Amersfoort was a witch, but now she was under a spell herself." Thomas and Mrs. van Amersfoort decide to start a read-aloud club that will consist of readings from books and music, and that the club will meet at her home.

Thomas meets Eliza on the street and notices that she has just left Mrs. van Amersfoort's house. Eliza embraces Thomas and tells him she is looking forward to hearing him read out loud. When he arrives home, Mother also tells him that the reading aloud club should be fun for him. He wonders how everyone knows about the club.

Thomas decides to put Mrs. van Amersfoort's letter inside his Father's Bible, so he will discover it. During dinner that evening. His Father opens the letter and reads it out loud. Then he makes a correction, stating that "A man who hits his wife without good reason dishonors himself." Father asks who put the letter inside the Bible, and no one confesses. So he begins to pray to God for an answer. At the same time, Jesus appears to Thomas and tells him that his Father "hides like a scared child behind God's broad back."

At first, Margot tells Father that she put the letter in the Bible, and found it in the street. But to protect Margot, Mother then says she put the letter in the Bible. Thomas is horrified, and to protect his mother, explains that he put the letter in the Bible and pinned it inside his shirt. He takes the pin from his pocket and places it on the dinner table as proof. When his Father tells him to get the spoon for another beating, Mother tells Thomas to stay put and defies her husband. "My brave hero stays here sitting next to me," she says.

Father and Mother fight over Thomas, each pulling on him, when suddenly Margot appears with the family's carving knife in her hand and threatens her father with it. Father gives up and gets on his knees to pray, but Margot won't relent. "I don't give a damn what you believe," she says. "But there will be no more hitting." Father leaves,



announcing that he will stay in a hotel. He returns later, but while he's gone, Margot steps on the wooden spoon to break it, then throws the two pieces out the window.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Unlike his oppressed mother, Thomas' Aunt Pie is outspoken and strong. She is not afraid to announce to the entire Klopper family that she was beaten by Benno for, of all things, wearing pants. She asks Father to intervene on her behalf, and announces that if Benno does not stop beating her, she will "stand in front of our house with a placard that says, 'Mr. Klopper Beats His Wife Because She Wears Trousers.'"

Father refuses to intervene on her behalf and speak to his brother about the beatings, because "God has ordained" that women should wear dresses, and men should wear trousers. "And if you obstinately resist God's commandments, your husband has the right, no the duty, to compel you to obey, with a hard hand if need be." Aunt Pie realizes that both brothers are "cowards," then asks Mother about the obvious injuries on her face. Even though she doesn't get an answer, it dawns on Aunt Pie that domestic abuse runs in the family. Like Mrs. van Amersfoort, Aunt Pie is not afraid of Father. She looks him squarely in the eye and says, "You are obviously useless."

Father again hides behind his religion, believing that beatings are "ordained" by God. When others seek his help, he refuses to provide it. And his children are witnesses. But again, the family has gained another supporter in Aunt Pie, now concerned that the Klopper brothers are both abusive to their wives and children.

Emboldened by the support of others, Thomas decides to place the note from Mrs. van Amersfoort inside Father's Bible. But before he does so, he remembers a quote from the Bible, when Jesus realizes He will die: "Let this cup of suffering be taken away from me." The words bring tears to Thomas' eyes, and he reminds himself, "Don't be afraid." The other people in his life, especially Mrs. van Amersfoort, have instilled the confidence he needs to confront his Father this way.

When Father discovers the note and asks who put it there, the rest of the family members protect one another from this bully. First Margot takes the blame, then Mother confesses, but finally, Thomas produces proof that he placed the note in the Bible by placing the safety pin on the dinner table. Father tells Thomas to get the wooden spoon for another beating, but this time, Mother defies her husband by holding Thomas close and says, "You have not deserved any punishment."

As the parents tug on Thomas, Margot suddenly appears with the constantly sharpened kitchen knife and points it at Father. "She looked like an angel. The most dangerous angel in Heaven. One of those with a flaming sword."

When Father collapses in prayer, Margot is the one who tells him the truth. "You know that it is wrong. But you do it anyway. As long as the neighbors don't notice. As long as the family doesn't notice. As long as nobody in the office finds out! Isn't it true?" Margot has lifted the veil of secrecy that once protected Father, and protects many individuals



who abuse their families. Thomas' older sister finally stands up to the bully, who storms out of the house to stay in a hotel. When he leaves, "the front door slammed shut like a clap of thunder."

Even through all of this, Mother is shocked that Margot has threatened Father with a knife.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

Mrs. van Amersfoort tells Thomas that the first read-aloud meeting will be held at his house instead of hers. She also tells Thomas that it was arranged with the help of his mother and Aunt Pie. This makes Thomas nervous, but she tells him to breathe deeply and close his eyes. Thomas tells Mrs. van Amersfoort that he often sees Jesus, which she understands.

After dinner that evening, Thomas, Margot and Mother hurry to prepare for the reading aloud meeting, and Father is confused by all the activity. He knows nothing about the planned meeting. Three of Thomas's aunts arrive first, including Aunt Pie. Eliza also arrives, and says she would like to sit next to Thomas. Then the group is joined by Mrs. van Amersfoort and four elderly women friends, carrying the gramophone and records.

When the program begins, Thomas recites a poem he has memorized, and receives loud applause from the group. When one of the women asks him what he wants to be when he grows up, he simply answers, "Happy. I want to be happy." That response elicits anger from his father, who says, "Only good-for-nothings and weaklings are happy. Life is a struggle."

The women in the room are left speechless, except for one elderly woman who asks Father a series of questions including, "Are you a brave man? Do you protect your wife and children against the evil world?" The women then play music by trumpeter Louis Armstrong, and Mrs. van Amersfoort hands Thomas the album cover. Thomas notes that Armstrong is a black man, and tells the group that he has never seen a black man. Father finally leaves the room, but announces that he has no time for "heathenish black music" and "poems that sound like empty vessels."

Thomas realizes that his Father wanted to stay in the room, but also wanted to get away. He feels sorry for his Father for the first time, realizing that his Father is "terrified." "He did not dare belong with people."

As he falls asleep that night, Thomas receives a visit from Jesus. Thomas asks Jesus if he can save his father, but Jesus says no. "It was a pity, but Thomas understood that some people are hard to redeem."

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

The end of *The Book of Everything* marks a turning point for the Klopper family, when Thomas realizes that the read aloud club arranged by Mrs. van Amersfoort will actually be held in his home and in the evening, when Father will be home. Thomas looks worried, and feels like he'd "swallowed a rhinoceros." But Mrs. van Amersfoort reassures him. "You must not be afraid. You wanted the plagues of Egypt, didn't you?"



Not the frogs, not the gnats and not the bubonic plague, but we are the best plague, we women and children. No Pharoah can resist us." The "plague" she describes is the bond the now exists among the women who want to help the Klopper family. The "Pharoah" she refers to is Father.

It's clear from the beginning of the meeting that Father knows nothing about the plans, and what's more, that his opinion about the read aloud meeting no longer matters.

It's as if new life has been breathed into Mother, who scurries about the house, cleaning up after dinner and hurrying upstairs to change her clothes. Thomas doesn't realize until the meeting begins that all of the women involved, including Mother, Margot, and Eliza, planned the meeting together and knew about it in advance. They have a common goal, which was to enjoy themselves and also a common enemy, Father. Mother's appearance at the gathering is described in loving detail by Thomas. She is wearing a pale yellow dress, lipstick, and her hair down around her shoulders. His description shows Thomas' deep love for his mother and Mother's transformation both physically and emotionally. She is a new person, surrounded by women who care for her well-being. Father only glares at her, his face "as red as the flowers on Aunt Magda's dress."

The first meeting of the read aloud club, attended by Aunt Pie, Mrs. van Amersfoort, two other aunts, Eliza, and other women, is important not just for what was on the agenda — Thomas reading poetry and the women playing some music — but for how Father reacts. When someone asks Thomas what he wants to be when he grows up, he simply answers, "Happy. I want to be happy." Father's reaction is swift and brutal. "Only good-for-nothings and weaklings are happy," he says. "Life is a struggle."

When Thomas sits down and stares at his shoes, Eliza put her hand over his for support. Then one of the women asks Father an important series of questions: "Have you faced many struggles in your life? Were you in the Resistance? Are you a brave man? Do you protect your wife and children from the evil world? Do you stand up for the weak?" Of course, Father has not accomplished any of the things she asks.

Before Father leaves the room in disgust, Thomas notices Margot and her Father locked in a gaze. Thomas notes that "Margot is no longer afraid." "She did not look angry, she did not look friendly, she just looked. There was nothing to be read in her eyes. Then Thomas saw that her eyes started to shine like mirrors. Father looked into those mirrors and saw himself. Nobody saw what he saw, because he was the only one who could look straight into her eyes. He had to face it all alone."

Although Thomas knows that Father loves his family, he nevertheless is a sad and angry man who hurts those that he loves the most. "Father was afraid of laughter and joy. He was particularly afraid of ridicule."



Characters

Thomas Klopper

Thomas is a nine-year-old boy who "sees things that no one else can see," including Jesus. He struggles to understand the differences between his home life, which is sad and abusive, and the outside world. He is afraid of his violent father, who beats him with a wooden spoon. He is tender toward his oppressed mother, and manages to slowly build his confidence through his friendships with outsiders, especially Mrs. van Amersfoort and Eliza. Thomas speaks often with Jesus, who appears to him as a funny, down-to-earth character. Jesus advises Thomas even though Thomas is convinced that God has abandoned them both. He is an avid reader, trying to imagine what the books' heroes would do if they were in his shoes. His stern father disapproves of the books that Thomas reads.

Margot Klopper

Thomas's sister, who mostly giggles. Although she is a good student in school, Thomas often believes she is silly and stupid. Margot, however, is as troubled as Thomas by their parents' relationship and the violence in their home. This becomes clear when Margot confronts Father with a knife during a violent family struggle. She tells her father, who falls to his knees to pray, "I don't give a damn what you believe. But there will be no more hitting." In the end, Margot becomes the one member of their family strong enough to stand up to their authoritarian father. Thomas eventually believes that his sister, who stares down her father, has become a strong witch, like Mrs. van Amersfoort.

Mother

Mother nurtures her children, particularly Thomas, but is dominated by a religious, abusive husband. Although she is initially too weak to stand up to her husband, Mother eventually does fight back to protect Thomas from another beating, and gets beaten herself. With the help of Aunt Pie, who is also beaten by her husband, and Mrs. van Amersfoort, Mother summons the strength to hold a read aloud club meeting in her home. The women who attend the meeting provide Mother with the strength to overcome her own fears and in a sense, share the family secret.

Father

Father, the antagonist, is a deeply religious but angry man. He reads sections of the Old Testament out loud to his family every night, and uses his religion as an excuse to lash out when his children or wife break his iron-clad rules. He is a classic bully in the privacy of the family's home, but his worst fears are realized when a neighbor and a sister-in-law find out about the abuse. He loses his upper hand when his family and friends hold



a read aloud club meeting in his home, embarrassing and ignoring him. He has been defeated by the powers of friendship and love.

Mrs. Van Amersfoort

Believed to be a witch by neighborhood children, Mrs. Van Amersfoort becomes a focal character by befriending Thomas and giving him books and poetry to read. She also knows about the violence that goes on in Thomas' home, and arranges a read-aloud club meeting at the Klopper home. Mrs. Van Amersfoort interrupts and violent fight in the Klopper home simply by knocking on their door to borrow a cup of sugar, and slips a note addressed to Father in the Kloppers' mailbox, which says, "A man who hits his wife dishonors himself."

Eliza

Eliza is a beautiful disabled girl Thomas meets one day, who seems to understand him. She is older than Thomas, but is thrilled when Thomas sends her a letter that says she is the most beautiful girl in the world. Because Thomas was kind to Eliza, in spite of her disabilities (a missing leg and missing fingers on one hand), she becomes his close friend. She also joins the women in their read aloud club, and at the end of the book, Jesus tells the angels, who are all "hopelessly in love with him," that Thomas is only interested in in the girl with the leather leg.

Aunt Pie

Aunt Pie is Father's sister-in-law, married to his brother Benno. She announces to the family that she has been beaten by her husband for wearing slacks. Even though she expects Father to intervene on her behalf, he refuses to do so, citing the Bible as a reason. Aunt Pie is undaunted, and intends to tell everyone that her husband beats her. Ultimately, Aunt Pie is one of the group of women who come to the aid of Mother, Thomas, and Margot by attending the read aloud club. She also brings along two other aunts, Aunt Magda and Aunt Bea.

Jesus

Jesus is as much of a character as those in the Klopper family, and "visits" Thomas in the middle of dinner, before he goes to sleep at night, and at other times. This Jesus is very informal, speaking to Thomas with words like "hey" and repeating phrases often used by family members like Aunt Pie and Granddad. At one point, in a conversation about Father, Jesus asks, "Has he gone completely off his head?" This Jesus, unlike the Biblical figures described by Father at dinner each night, is comforting, understanding, and often funny. Near the end of the book, Thomas see Jesus transform himself into an image of Mother.



Objects/Places

Amsterdam

Amsterdam, the Netherlands, is the setting for *The Book of Everything*. In a historical note written as a foreword, Kuijer notes that in 1951, the time of the novel, the Netherlands was still recovering from occupation by the Nazis for almost five years during World War II. During that period, some of the Dutch collaborated with the Nazis and others worked in the Resistance movement to shelter Jews and thwart the Nazis.

The Wooden Spoon

The wooden spoon is used by Thomas' father to punish him. He first punishes Thomas with the spoon because Thomas sings the litany in church incorrectly, then tries to punish Thomas again when he learns that Thomas has placed Mrs. van Amersfoort's note inside Father's Bible. When his plan to punish Thomas a second time is thwarted by Margot, Father leaves their home and Margot grabs the wooden spoon, places it across the threshold and steps on it, breaking it in half. She throws the two pieces out the window, and says, "Out with it." Thomas thinks with each "thwack" of the wooden spoon that "God does not exist."

The Plagues of Egypt

The Plagues of Egypt is the Biblical story of when God asked Moses to inflict a series of 10 plagues on Pharaoh and Egypt until the Israelites were released. The plagues begin with turning the waters of the Nile into blood, and continues with frogs overtaking the country, and so on. Father reads regularly from the plagues of Egypt during dinner, and both Thomas and Margot are impacted by these stories. After the story of the Nile being turned into blood, Thomas pours red cordial into his fish tank. And after the story about frogs, Thomas wakes to find a plague of frogs taking over his street and trying to come into his home.

Mrs. van Amersdoorf's Apartment

Thomas befriends Mrs. van Amersdoorf when she protects him from Bottombiter, the neighborhood's mean dog. He describes her apartment as covered everywhere with newspapers, books and magazines. There is a huge globe in one corner, a large map on the wall, and two cats. He's convinced that he's entered the home of a witch, but quickly learns otherwise when she pulls out a portable gramophone and plays music for Thomas. She also lends him books to read and provides him with a warm friendship and concern.



Eliza's Leather Leg

Eliza walks with one leather leg, which "creaks like a new pair of shoes." Thomas summons up the courage to send Eliza a letter, in which he writes, "Maybe you think you are not beautiful because you have a leather leg that creaks when you walk. Or because one of your hands has only a little finger and nothing else. But that is not true. You are the most beautiful girl in the world."

The Note

Thomas discovers a note addressed to Father in the mail slot one day, and notices that it is from Mrs. van Amersfoort. Because Father has never spoken to Mrs. van Amersfoort and calls her a Communist, Thomas is terrified. He decides to open the letter and discovers that it says, simply: "A man who hits his wife dishonors himself." Thomas pins the note inside his shirt until he and Margot decide that Father should discover the note. Thomas places it inside the Bible.

The Book of Everything

The Book of Everything, also the title, is Thomas' journal, which he writes in on a regular basis. In the foreword of the book, Thomas, now an old man, turns his journal over to the author and calls it "disrespectful." But the author is so moved by Thomas' journal that he invites him back to help him turn it into a book.

The Window

Throughout the book, there are references to the window. Thomas is inspired to write by looking out the window in his bedroom, symbolizing that unless he looks outward, he can't really think straight or be inspired to write in his journal. Margot also chooses to throw pieces of the broken wooden spoon out of the living room window, which symbolizes the family's freedom from further abuse.

The Aquarium

Thomas' aquarium contains swordtails, "cute little fish that do a funny dance in the water when they're in love." He spots swordtails in the canal one day, and wonders how they got into the canal. That's when he meets Eliza for the first time, who tells Thomas that swordtails enter the canal when people flush them down their toilets. When Thomas gets Mrs. van Amersfoort's bottle of red cordial, he dumps its contents into his aquarium, a decision that sets off a violent struggle between Mother, Father, and Thomas.

The Bible

Father uses the Bible as a teaching tool, reading from it every night at dinner. But he also uses the Bible as an excuse to back up his unkindness and abuse. When Margot talks about the books she reads in school, Father admonishes her, saying, "There is only one real book in this world, and that is the Bible. The books you have to read for school have been written by sinful people who are like the Pharaoh's sorcerers. They write books, but they are false books." When Aunt Pie complains about being beaten by her husband, Father tells her she deserved such treatment because she "resisted God's commandments." For Thomas and Margot, the Bible becomes a symbol of Father's authoritarianism.



Themes

Religious Fervor

Religious fervor and fundamentalism is a theme throughout *The Book of Everything*, and is embodied in Thomas' father. Father reads each night at dinnertime from the Bible's Old Testament, and takes his family to church services held in a home. They are not allowed to use public transportation Sundays, and must walk to their services. As evidenced several times in the book, Father references what he's read in the Bible and interprets it literally, using it as an explanation for his close-mindedness and even immoral behavior. He abuses his wife and son when they disobey him, and believes that is his right as a man. He refuses to intervene when his brother, Benno, abuses Aunt Pie. He believes that the kind Mrs. van Amersfoort is a Communist and anti-Christian. And he calls Louis Armstrong jazz as "heathenish black music" and the poems that Thomas recites as sounding "like empty vessels."

Ironically, after Thomas tells Father that he was waving good-bye to Jesus, Father slams his hand on the Bible, "making the dust of three thousand years swirl." Then he shouts, "I will not put up with this. In my house, there will be no jokes about our Lord and Redeemer. Is that understood?"

Father's views are rigid and formal, unlike the Jesus who appears to Thomas in his most dire moments. When Margot mentions a book she is reading in school, Father says, "Remember this, Margot. There is only one real book in the world, and that is the Bible. The books you have to read for school have been written by sinful people who are like the Pharaoh's sorcerers. They write books, but they are false books." Later in the book, Margot challenges her Father's own words when she announces that she was sent out of class because she refused to read "false books." "I said that the Bible was enough for me," she tells Father. He gets angry at Margot, telling her that she misunderstood his point about reading school books.

Domestic Abuse

The Klopper family suffers from the worst kind of domestic abuse, and the book contains numerous examples. Father beats Thomas with a wooden spoon simply because he misunderstood the words to a litany in church. When Mother tries to protect Thomas from the beating, Father slaps her across the face. When Thomas and Mother attempt to siphon red-colored water out of the aquarium, a violent scene ensues, and Thomas watches as Mother, for the first time, attempts to defend herself by punching her husband back. But Father is much stronger, and punches Mother until she crumples to the floor. Her injuries are still evident for days after that beating.

When Aunt Pie visits and announces to the family that she has been beaten by Father's brother, Benno, the response she receives from Father is chilling. He tells her that when



wives and children refuse to listen to their husbands and fathers, they have no choice to to "take severe measures." Unlike Mother, Aunt Pie announces her abuse to others. In fact, she tells Thomas and Margot to stay in the room while she discusses with issue with Father and Mother: "Margot, Thomas, your Uncle Benno has hit your Aunt Pie. There." She also threatens to "stand in front of our house with a placard that says, 'Mr. Klopper Beats His Wife Because She Wears Trousers.'"

Thomas, like many victims of abuse, is ashamed of what takes places inside his home. He is also terrified of his Father's reaction if anyone outside of the family learns of the abuse, and is even afraid to have visitors enter their home. Even when Aunt Pie blurts out her story of abuse, Thomas thinks, "The earth trembled and Heaven held its breath. The birds in the trees fell silent

and the wind died down. Church bells started ringing of their own accord and trams ground to a halt."

In the most disturbing scene in the book, when Mother and Father fight over whether Thomas will be punished, literally pulling on him from both sides, Margot steps in, holding Father's sharpened kitchen knife in his direction. Thomas' older sister, who until this time dealt with Father's outbursts by giggling or singing silly songs, summons the courage to fight back. "You are not kind," she tells Father. "Don't think I won't dare." As with many families suffering from domestic abuse, it often takes violence or a threat of violence to stop the abuser.

World War II

The effects of World War II, specifically the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam and the persecution of Jews, can still be felt in *The Book of Everything*. Perhaps the most obvious example is the presence of Mrs. van Amersfoort, whose husband was executed by the Nazis when they learned he was a member of the Resistance. Thomas' mother tells him that Mrs. van Amersfoort also saved people during the war, and risked her own life for others. In her own small way, Mrs. van Amersfoort steps in again when she meets Thomas and suspects that the family suffers from an abusive Father.

Thomas also witnesses the arrest of a neighbor, Bikkelmans, who is alleged by neighbors to have been a Nazi sympathizer. "Serves him right," one of the neighbors says as the man is carried away in a police car. "He was even worse than we thought." Although the war has been over for six years, the emotions are still raw and those who remain in Amsterdam continue to see the world as two different warring sides.

When Father learns that Thomas has visited Mrs. van Amersfoort and borrowed a book from her, he prohibits Thomas from visiting her again, calling her a Communist. "When the Russians come, she'll be out on the sidewalk cheering," he says. "And all of us Christians will become slaves." Father is living in the past, still convinced that somehow, Amsterdam will be overrun again and this time by Russians.



Style

Point of View

The story is recounted in the third person, but from the perspective of the young nine-year-old Thomas Klopper. Due to his youth, Thomas doesn't initially understand that his Father's behavior is aberrant until he meets sympathetic outsiders like Mrs. van Amersfoort. As the book progresses, a series of events transpire that provide Thomas with the confidence and support he needs to protect his mother and change the family's destiny.

Setting

The setting is Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 1951, just six years after Germany surrendered at the end of World War II and withdrew its troops from the Netherlands. Memories of the war are still fresh, and Thomas learns that Mrs. van Amersfoort's husband was executed by the Nazis for being a member of the Dutch Resistance. For his part, Father calls Mrs. van Amersfoort "a Communist." At one point in the book, Thomas watches as one of his neighbors, believed to have helped the Nazis, is dragged from his home and arrested.

Language and Meaning

Thomas is young and impressionable, and he makes it clear from the beginning that his Book of Everything will document his life and that he will remember everything and write about it. The language he uses shows that he often escapes into his imagination to invent a life more interesting and safer than his own. During dramatic moments in the book, particularly when Thomas fears his Father, the language sounds fearful. When Aunt Pie arrives and announces that her husband beats her, "The earth trembled and Heaven held its breath. The birds in the trees fell silent and the wind died down. Church bells started ringing of their own accord and trams ground to a halt."

Likewise, when Thomas feels confident or happy, his thoughts reveal that. When Eliza kisses him on the cheek, "His ears were ringing and he heard the music he had heard before, with lots of violins. He jumped for joy."

Thomas' conversations with Jesus are refreshingly informal, primarily because of Jesus. He speaks to Thomas on his own level, saying, "Hey there, Thomas. Everything under control?" When Thomas refers to him as "Lord Jesus," he tells Thomas, "Just call me Jesus."

Structure

The novel is constructed of 10 chapters in chronological order. The book begins with a historical note, written by the author, which explains the setting and novel's backdrop against World War II. In the foreword, called "Before the Story Begins," the author notes that his childhood was a happy one. But he is visited by an older man named Thomas Klopper, who wants to share his childhood journal with the author. Mr. Klopper calls the journal "disrespectful," and after the author reads it, he agrees. The two work together on the book, and when they are done, the author asks Thomas if he managed "to become happy." Thomas says yes.



Quotes

"Father was afraid of laughter and joy. He was particularly afraid of ridicule. He was afraid that someone would say that humans are descended from apes. Or that the Earth is much older than four thousand years. Or that someone would ask where Noah got his polar bears from. Or that someone would swear. Father was terrified" (Chapter 10, p. 109).

"Thomas simply thought the trams away. He thought away everything that was forbidden: The trams, the cars, the bicycles, and the boys playing soccer in the street. The birds could stay, for they didn't know it was Sunday. Because they had no soul" (Chapter 1, p. 13).

"'Mama and Thomas have no reason to be afraid of God,' she hissed. 'Because they are kind. You are not kind.' She made a stabbing movement with the knife. 'Don't think I won't dare,' she growled. 'I am like you. I am not kind either' (Chapter 8, p. 90).

"Father raised his voice. 'And if you obstinately resist God's commandments, your husband has the right, no, the duty, to compel you to obey, with a hard hand if need be' (Chapter 7, p. 71).

"He knelt and tried to push open the letterbox. That was not so easy, for it was jammed tight with frogs. He pushed and pushed until he managed to open the letterbox just a bit. Immediately, ten frog legs poked through the chink, as if he were in a horror story. But he didn't like horror stories, so that couldn't be" (Chapter 6, p. 60).

"The Lord Jesus looked at Thomas and laid a hand on his head. 'You are strong, Thomas,' he said. 'You are strong because you are kind, will you remember that? All of us up here are proud of you. Do you believe that?'" (Chapter 5, p. 57).

"The angels in heaven covered their eyes with their hands and sobbed loudly, because that is what they always do when a man hits his wife. A profound sadness settled over the earth" (Chapter 1, p. 16).

"'Happy,' said Thomas. 'When I grow up, I'm going to be happy' Mrs. van Amersfoort was about to pull a book from the shelf, but turned in surprise. She looked at Thomas with a smile and said, 'That is a damn good idea. And do you know how happiness begins? It begins with no longer being afraid'" (Chapter 2, p. 27).

"'Sunday is the only day you have to push like a handcart,' Thomas wrote in the Book of Everything. 'The other days roll down the bridge by themselves'" (Chapter 1, p. 12).

"It was a windy day with a lot of rain. A day that would shake the world. For ever after, trams would scream as they rounded a corner. Men walked through the streets with grim faces, not liking one another" (Chapter 8, p. 80).



"Thomas stayed standing up because his bottom felt like a pincushion. He stared out of the window and whispered, 'Please, God, will you please exist. All of the plagues of Egypt, please. He has hit Mama and it wasn't the first time!'" (Chapter 1, p. 19).

"'A man who hits his wife...!' Thomas muttered uneasily. So she knew! He flushed with shame. She had discovered the great secret. There were secrets you could safely pass on. But this was a secret nobody must know, because it was awful" (Chapter 4, p. 39).

"Father jumped forward, yanked the hose out of the aquarium with one hand, and with the other hit Mother in the face. Mother screamed. The the unbelievable happened: She hit back. She screamed and hit and hit and hit. But only once did she actually strike the man's face. The other blows landed on his arms. Then the man began to punch her wildly, wherever he could. He was much stronger than she was. She crumpled up and fell to the ground weeping. At that moment, it started to rain all over the world" (Chapter 5, p. 52).



Topics for Discussion

How is the setting and time of *The Book of Everything* important as a backdrop to Thomas' story?

What is the symbolism of the great plagues of Egypt in this story?

Discuss the character of Margot, the sister Thomas initially describes as "dumb as an ox." Is she really as dumb as Thomas first believes? At what point in the story does Margot show her strength?

Why is Father the weakest character in the book? In what specific ways does Father act weak?

What events transpire to give Thomas, Margot and Mother hope that their home life will change for the better?

Does Thomas really see the frogs, speak to Jesus, and feel Mrs. van Amersfoort's chairs rise off the floor? Are these events all a part of his imagination?

Who is the most heroic character in the story, and why?

What is the author trying to convey about Father's religion? What emotions does Thomas feel about Father's religion and the church they attend?

Will the Klopper family's circumstances change after the reading aloud club is held at their home and if so, in what ways? Why will change come about?