

# **Crash (Jerry Spinelli) Study Guide**

## **Crash (Jerry Spinelli) by Jerry Spinelli**

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# Plot Summary

Jerry Spinelli's "Crash" novel takes place over the course of John "Crash" Coogan's seventh grade year with brief glimpses of his life when he was younger. During his seventh grade year, John is forced to confront his changing stances on violence, aggression, and bullying. In particular, John has to think about who he really is and whether his true thoughts, feelings, and actions match up with the ultra-competitive and physically dominant jock "Crash Man" persona that was given to him when he was just a little boy. John's changing relationships with his neighbor and bullying victim Penn Webb, best friend and fellow football player Mike Deluca, and beloved grandfather Scooter help shape John's transformation from someone who always did what others expected of him to someone who acts with more sincerity and stays true to his thoughts, opinions, and beliefs.

At the beginning of the novel readers meet the one person who does not call John "Crash," Penn Webb. Penn moves to John's Pennsylvania neighborhood on the eve of the boys' first grade year. Penn, a true nonconformist, represents so many things that go against what John believes in: violence, wealth, and athletic ability. Most important, however, is Penn's stance of non-confrontation. John tries repeatedly to tease, provoke, and harm Penn, but Penn does not engage in a confrontation with John. This sticks out to John because he is used to scaring people off or else being challenged by them. The years pass and John avoids Penn, who remains friendly to him. In sixth grade John meets Mike Deluca, the first person to equal John in terms of loving conflict, football, and fighting. They become good friends, and Mike often ropes John into his stunts to bully Penn. John agrees to participate in them.

Now in seventh grade, the boys are thrilled by the appearance of new girl Jane Forbes, but John's efforts to talk to her are squashed when she all but ignores him. John's parents are absent much of the time because they have grueling jobs. John's little sister Abby is friends with Penn and adopts some of his causes, such as conservationism, sustainability, and being eco-friendly. In the first football game of the season John scores a record-breaking number of touchdowns in a single game, but he is frustrated that neither of his parents showed up to watch him, especially because Penn's parents are there to support Penn's cheerleading efforts. But when John comes home he is delighted to find his grandfather, Scooter, cooking in the kitchen. John can hardly believe that his beloved Scooter is back, but it seems he will be moving in permanently. John's mother (Scooter's daughter) reveals that she will be getting some new real estate business with the construction of a new mall. John and Abby enjoy Scooter's nightly storytelling efforts, which send them into shrieks of terror, and also trust Scooter as a confidant. Scooter also supports his grandchildren by supporting Abby's backyard habitat project and attending John's practices and games.

At a school dance John attempts to flirt with Jane and get her to dance with him, but she rejects him and calls him out for being an inconsiderate bully. John is enraged when Penn shows up because it angers him that Penn is able to break through Jane's icy attitude and befriend her. Meanwhile, Abby protests the mall on TV, which frustrates



Mrs. Coogan. At Thanksgiving, John tackles Scooter and worries that his grandfather is getting old. In December Scooter is hospitalized after having a massive stroke. While he is in the rehab center the Webbs reach out to the Coogans with food, and Penn even gives Scooter his Missouri River Mud which has supposedly magical medicinal powers. Over Christmas break Mike and John get into a fight when Mike finds and wears Scooter's hat. This signals the beginning of the end of their friendship, which erodes further in the new year at school when Mike ramps up his bullying game and targets Penn. John wants nothing to do with this and intervenes. Penn has started to run around the neighborhood at night, and eventually John discovers that Penn is hoping his great-grandfather can see him race in the Penn Relays when he visits this spring. John joins the track team as well. Scooter improves enough to come home, but all he can say is "A-bye." He also has physical limitations.

In the climactic scene of the novel, John and Penn compete in a race-off for the remaining spot on the school's Penn Relays team. John lets Penn win on purpose. John shows more compassion in general now and helps Abby with her wildlife habitat project. Mrs. Coogan announces she will be working only part-time from now on, and John encourages her to resume her painting hobby by buying her paints. At the end of the novel, Mr. Coogan has made peace with the wild backyard, John is going to a party at Jane Forbes' house, and Penn is his best friend.



# Chapters 1-4

## Summary

Chapter 1 opens with John setting the stage for the main narrative by starting with a flashback. John "Crash" Coogan explains how he got his nickname. When John was a young boy he received a football helmet as a present for Christmas. John tackled his cousin Bridget. John does not really remember the incident but does think it makes sense since he tends to crash into people and things wherever he goes. There is only one person who does not call John "Crash," Penn Webb, his peer and neighbor. John then takes readers back to the summer before first grade when he meets Penn the day after Penn moves into the neighborhood. Penn introduces himself and explains that he got his name from his great-grandfather, who ran in the Penn Relays track and field event. Penn says he is from the prairies of North Dakota but just moved to Pennsylvania. John and Penn trade likes and dislikes and facts about their families. Something about Penn's extremely enthusiastic and positive attitude bothers John, and he takes Penn's button off his shirt and buries it in the dirt. Penn walks away.

The next day, in Chapter 2, John is outside and is half-dreading, half-hoping to see Penn. Eventually he goes looking for him, and Penn finds him. John still gives him a fake name, telling Penn that his name is "Humphrey." John plays with Penn's "Peace" button, and Penn shows John his house. Penn's house is small compared to John's, and John calls it a garage. John is also alarmed to see that Penn's parents are older than most parents. John lies about his grandfather Scooter's age. Penn shows John his turtle. John goes home and tries to find out if he has a great-grandfather.

In Chapter 3 Penn invites John to his house for dinner. He has figured out John's name because Abby told him, but John tells him he cannot call him "Crash." John says he will come over only if Penn beats him in a draw with water pistols. Penn refuses to take part since he is a member of the Quaker religion and is against violence. John's reaction to this revelation is covered in Chapter 4. John shoots Penn with the water pistol anyway, but it is not as fun as he'd hope it to be. John challenges him to a wrestling match, which Penn loses. Penn says he is good at running, so they race to the mailbox, but Penn still loses. He walks away, dejected, but John says he will come anyway.

## Analysis

By opening the book with the story behind John's "Crash" nickname, Spinelli alerts his reader that the issue of identity is central to the novel, a decision that is echoed in the title of the novel. John introduces himself to the reader not by describing his appearance, interests, or feelings; rather, he orients himself in his world by describing how others see him. This clues the reader in that John's relation to others' perception of him will be a recurring theme, as will the question of whether he chooses to embrace his nickname and fulfill the personality and actions "Crash" seems to prescribe for him or



not. Additionally, this is structured to introduce Penn Webb as the only person who does not call John by that nickname and hint at John's early attempts to define himself as someone other than the "Crash Man."

When John first meets Penn, he is given an opportunity to make an impression on someone who has never seen him before, someone who approaches him without knowledge of the Crash persona. Penn has no expectations for John because he has not heard stories about him that would make Penn think that John is aggressive, strong, violent, and intimidating. From his first conversation with Penn, John shows the reader that he is competitive. He repeatedly challenges Penn in their initial conversation as he tries to top Penn's descriptions of his parents' occupations. John shows that he feels he has to prove his superiority by having the last word. By introducing himself as "Megatroid" John is testing Penn. Yet Penn does not engage John in a fight or even give any reaction to John's obvious attempts to pull his leg. Later Penn asks if he can call him "Crash," but John refuses and tells him he can call him "horsemeat." This shows the reader that John does not always want to be known as the Crash Man.

In spite of himself, John is intrigued by Penn and subtly tries to find him in the neighborhood. When Penn invites him over to his house to meet his turtle, John accepts his offer. Penn offers John a chance to meet someone different than his neighbors and peers as well as an opportunity to start over with someone new. Penn's house, no bigger than a garage, startles John. Before he agrees to go over to Penn's house for a meal, John challenges Penn to a draw with toy pistols. Penn's refusal to engage in a pistol draw with John because of his Quaker religious beliefs startles John. Pacifism is inconceivable to John, especially as his Crash personality was shaped by violence. When John gives Penn one final test to try to compete with him, John is testing Penn, hoping to prove he is a superior athlete. But John sees that there is more to Penn than meets the eye. John's attempts to size Penn up tell him that Penn might have a passive personality but he can actually be competitive when the contest tests his talents. John is curious about Penn and Penn's family, so he ultimately accepts his invitation to come over for dinner partially because he does not want to hurt Penn's feelings and partially because he is intrigued by someone who shows him that you do not always have to conform to society's standards.

## Discussion Question 1

What are your first impressions of John? Why does he open the story with telling readers about his name and nickname? What would you expect from a kid whose nickname is Crash?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think John is drawn to Penn? Why does he continually try to mock Penn even though Penn is forever unfazed by it?



## Discussion Question 3

John seems to be telling us of all the differences between John and Penn, but what might some of the similarities be? Why do you think they would or would not be good friends?

## Vocabulary

runt, gawk, motormouth, stagger, droopy



# Chapters 5-8

## Summary

In Chapter 5 John goes over to Penn's house for dinner to meet his parents. John introduces himself as "Crash" to Mr. and Mrs. Webb. He explains how he got the nickname by crashing into his cousin and knocking her into the snow. As Penn leads him throughout the house, John discovers that Penn has more quirks than he can count. John is startled that Penn does not live in a two-story house and is alarmed that Penn's toys consist of a Conestoga Wagon and a jar of dried mud from the Missouri River that his great-grandfather gave him.

In Chapter 6, John finds out that the Webbs are vegetarians who do not eat any meat. Penn admits that he did not tell John this on purpose because he was afraid John would not come over. John is horrified yet curious at the foods the Webbs offer him. John learns that Mr. and Mrs. Webb are Quakers just like Penn. They oppose war and violence, which shocks John, whose excitement for his Mazooka toy gun falls flat. Sometimes John is deliberately trying to provoke the Webbs. Mr. Webb says he is starting to see why people call John "Crash." John asks if the Webbs are poor, and Mrs. Webb answers no and says, "...I would say in a lot of ways we're rich." John also learns that they do not have a TV. The dinner ends with John refusing the Webbs' invitation to accompany them that Saturday on their drive to Amish country. John says he is going to a Philadelphia Phillies baseball game with his father. John leaves the Webbs' house, and in Chapter 7 he asks his father if they can go to the Phillies game. His father says they just cannot make it. John spends Saturday watching cartoons and sees the Webbs drive by. He later puts a meatball in a bag and leaves it in front of their door.

In Chapter 8 John explains how he grows apart from Penn as they grow older and eventually Penn leaves him alone. In sixth grade John meets Mike Deluca, who does not back down from his challenge. John seems to have met his match, and indeed both boys have things in common like similar aspirations with football. Yet Mike singles Penn out as a new victim. John says he has been leaving Penn alone, but Mike says that that is going to change, an ominous statement that foreshadows the prominent theme of bullying in Spinelli's novel.

## Analysis

These chapters wrap up the "Then" flashback part of John's narrative and then foreshadow what's to come. Penn's house, parents, and life seem entirely unusual to John. John sees the Webbs as people who willingly deprive themselves of things that he believes make life great: eating meat, having a two-story house, being able to pick from a bunch of superhero toys, and accepting and promoting war and violence, for example. John later leaves a meatball on their front porch, less an act of vandalism than a misguided gesture meant to provoke them. Ultimately, the Webbs do not feel like they





are missing out at all. They claim they are rich in other ways, something that John starts to see later.

Friendly and generous, the Webbs invite John to accompany them on a trip to the Amish area of Pennsylvania this weekend. John makes an excuse that he is going to the Philadelphia Phillies baseball game with his father, but when he gets back home later and asks his father about it, Mr. Coogan says they cannot go. On Saturday John watches cartoons on his TV and sees the Webbs drive by in their unimpressive, small, and likely used car. The contrast is stark; though John's parents let him watch TV and he has a two story house, John does not have the same closeness with his family as Penn does. The Coogans do not spend much time together, and as readers see later in the novel even having dinner together is rare for John's family. This makes John reconsider which family is "rich" and which family is "poor."

The narrative then moves up to sixth grade when John meets Mike Deluca. Although the reader might expect a kid like John--an athlete with a nickname that speaks to his reputation for aggression and power--to have a circle of admirers, but John seems like more of a loner before he meets Mike. John does not regale the reader with stories of friends he has or parties he attends. Rather, from what has been shown of John so far he is somewhat awkward and abrasive around his peers. Mike rises to John's challenge over where he is from, and the two have a mock fight before they dissolve into laughter. Mike is a competitor just like John, but whereas John sees Penn as someone mildly obnoxious but not worth his time, Mike sizes Penn up as prey. John's likening of Mike to a cat watching a squirrel when Mike is looking at Penn walk down the street foreshadows how Mike will make it his goal to make Penn's life miserable. Mike sees Penn as someone weaker than him and, therefore, a victim that needs to be crushed. John, however, does not share this same drive to destroy people who are weaker than he is. Mike needs to destroy someone to feel secure with himself, but John views victories more in terms of scoring points and winning games. Spinelli clues readers in that this is definitely going to be an interesting friendship characterized by power struggles and thinly veiled competition.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does John leave a meatball in front of the Webbs' door? What do you make of his constant attempts to provoke the Webbs?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does John refuse Penn's offers of friendship? What clues does this give readers about his insecurities?



## Discussion Question 3

How does John's first encounter with Mike Deluca contrast with John's first time meeting Penn? Why do you think Mike and John hit it off?

## Vocabulary

pitiful, gawk, bulge, sheepish, clamp, consume, piped, chime, squawk, pester



# Chapters 9-12

## Summary

Chapter 9 opens on the first day of seventh grade. Mike and John, now best friends, observe Penn, who is as cheerful and friendly as ever. Mike messes with Penn and acts like they are good friends. Penn proudly reveals that his shirt is secondhand and was possibly purchased at the Second Time Around thrift store. Mike and John crack up but try to hide it from Penn. Neither of them would ever go to school wearing secondhand clothes.

John and Mike both wonder "Who is that?" and Chapter 10 opens with the boys struggling to identify an attractive, unfamiliar girl standing by herself. John wonders if she is one of their female classmates who has transformed over the summer. John thinks she is someone named Michelle Pratt and goes over to talk to her, much to Mike's amazement that his friend is now interested in girls. But the girl denies that she is Michelle and rejects John's advances. The boys soon learn that her name is Jane Forbes, she just moved from Wilmington, and she is also in seventh grade. They speculate that she might join cheerleading. Both Mike and John are infatuated with Jane and each boy tries to stake a claim on her in a verbal spat that turns into a food fight.

The boys are pulled out of lunch and taken to the vice principal who, in Chapter 11, lets them off by telling Mike and John to save their fighting for the football field. The boys assemble for football practice after school along with the cheerleaders and field hockey participants. They see Webb and first think he is going out for football but then are startled when they discover he is joining the cheerleading squad, along with Jane Forbes. In Chapter 12 John and Mike go over to John's house and devour a pizza. They wonder if Penn is really serious about being a cheerleader, but John points out that there are male cheerleaders in college.

## Analysis

In Chapter 9 readers see that Mike and John are still good friends. Teasing Penn is one of their favorite activities, but Mike takes the lead while John is more passive in their jokes. John's near-phobia of secondhand clothing shows that he still values ostentatious displays of wealth over a more thrifty and frugal philosophy. Mike shares this view. Evidently John's definition of "rich" and "poor" has not changed over the years. Besides having shallow opinions on secondhand clothing, John and Mike are also attracted to Jane because of her appearance. Even though John's efforts to engage her in conversation fail, John does not see this as something he cannot overcome. John obviously thinks his reputation as Crash Coogan, someone who scores a lot of touchdowns and is "...so good and so handsome," will make him automatically irresistible. Jane proves him wrong in their first encounter, a rejection that proves to be prophetic of their future conversations.



Chapter 11 shows the reader that John and Mike get away with a lot because they are members of the football team. The vice principal says that he has heard John is a "loose cannon." This suggests that John has a reputation for being unpredictable, volatile, and perhaps even a little unstable. John's behavior so far certainly seems to align with being a loose cannon given that his competitive game of one-upping his best friend escalates from just joking around to approaching a level of aggression in which neither boy knows when to back down. For someone who already has a defined identity as the Crash Man, John shows there is room for him to change. His loose cannon nature allows him room to adjust his behavior. "Crash" is John's journey from having an unstable identity to one that is more authentic and true to his emotions.

Chapters 11 and 12 also show how Mike and John are insecure enough to be bothered by Penn's choice to join the cheerleading team. Penn subverts gender expectations and seems to unknowingly be waging war against Mike and John's definition of masculinity. In later chapters the reader sees how Penn is able to form a relationship with Jane that John cannot match. In this way Penn definitely has "game."

## Discussion Question 1

Is there a difference in the way Mike teases Penn and the way John used to tease Penn?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Jane reacts the way she does when she meets Mike? What does this tell readers about her?

## Discussion Question 3

Were you surprised the vice principal lets John and Mike go? What does this say about John and Mike's reputation and how they are treated in school?

## Vocabulary

prehistoric, scrawny, thrift, trailed, stampede, uproar, bonkers, scrimmage, looney



# Chapters 13-17

## Summary

In Chapter 13 readers get to see a typical evening for the Coogans. Mrs. Coogan comes home from work and is utterly exhausted. She jokes around about how she has not made a real estate sale in an alarmingly long time. John tells his mom that Penn is trying out for cheerleading. She seems in disbelief, but Abby sticks up for Penn since they are friends. Mr. Coogan comes home and is suspicious because Abby is so happy to see him. Abby asks Mr. Coogan the number of square feet in an acre, but Mrs. Coogan answers. John and his father joke around about the football permission slip. Penn's decision to try out for the cheerleading team brings much laughter to John and his father, but Mrs. Coogan defends Penn's secondhand clothing when John makes fun of him for it. Abby asks if their mother can get their clothes at Second Time Around from now on, and Mrs. Coogan says, "We'll see." John asks his father if he can come to his first football game, and his father nods. At the end of the night Abby excitedly observes that all four of them have eaten together, "Just like a real family."

In Chapter 14 John and Mike play a prank on Penn during class. Penn takes off his shoes, and John squirts mustard in them. At the end of class Penn does not give any indication that this has bothered him, much to John and Mike's amusement. In Chapter 15 John demonstrates just how aggressive and competitive he really is. Mike and John get into a typical verbal argument, and then they engage in a physical fight with the eighth grader and quarterback, Eric Schultz, who has been threatening John. The football coaches break the boys apart. At the close of the chapter John and Mike are astonished to see Jane Forbes helping Penn wash the mustard out of his shoes. In Chapter 16 John and Mike talk about Penn and Jane on their way over to John's house after practice. They share a pizza, and Abby declares she is now a vegetarian and does not eat anything with a face. Mike spots something moving in the room. The thought of a mouse being in the house bothers John. His voice becomes strained, and he stands on the kitchen table. In Chapter 17 John tells his father that there is a "rat" loose in the house. He follows his father into his study and brags about how he and Mike beat up Schultz. The chapter closes with John looking at his baby portrait. Somebody has drawn a mustache on the glass above his face, so John tries to wipe it off.

## Analysis

The dinner scene in Chapter 13 serves as a slice of life depicting an unusual night in the Coogan household. Abby proudly declares that they all ate together "Just like a real family," highlighting that having all four of them around the table is a rarity. Mrs. Coogan comes home and seems to be barely holding it together for her children after a long day at the office. Abby's exuberance at having both of her parents home seems to alarm her parents. Mrs. Coogan can barely summon the energy required to make dinner and



interact with her children. Mr. Coogan's reaction to Abby is, "What does she want?" as if there is something unnatural about a daughter telling her father that she loves him.

This chapter also shows the characters navigate gender stereotypes. While Mr. Coogan and John ridicule Penn's decision to join the cheerleading team, Mrs. Coogan and Abby defend Penn and stick up for him. Yet Abby asks her father a question about measurements and is surprised when her mother answers even though her mother went to real estate school. Her initial confusion over who to ask is a subtle hint from Spinelli that even at the time of "Crash"'s publication in 1996 there was still a gender bias about what women and men were supposed to know. Mrs. Coogan represents a newer generation of women at work after the rise of feminism. She does not seem especially empowered or excited about working, nor does she seem like she pines to be home with her children.

Another theme in this chapter is the inability of John to talk to his father. When he asks his father if he can make his game, John beats himself up for asking and is ashamed. Mr. Coogan can only nod. Just like with the scene when John asks if they can go to the Phillies game, Mr. Coogan gives John a look that says it all. Clearly there is a communication barrier between the two men.

Meanwhile, at school John and Mike are up to their same old tricks pranking Penn. Mike and John seem to have a ritual of exchanging insults before practice to psych each other up. John explains that football is a "violent and emotional game. The more charged up you are, the better you play," a philosophy that colors his approach to most situations. During practice, Mike and John see Jane Forbes--John's crush and Penn's cheerleading teammate--helping Penn wash the mustard out of his shoes. The boys cannot seem to fathom why Jane wants to hang out with Penn. Abby's newfound vegetarian philosophy is threatening to John and Mike, especially because they know that Abby is being influenced by Penn. John and Mike do not take Abby's wishes seriously and use it as fodder for laughter. They cannot accept any deviance from the norm, a sign that they have a limited ability to empathize with other people, especially those who are "different" or push the boundaries of societal conventions. John's reaction to the mouse sighting illustrates that he has contradictions within his Crash Man character. Even Abby notes how the mouse stripped him of his confidence and terrified him, an irony since John boasts of being big, strong, and the one to frighten others, not be frightened himself. This shows the reader that there is a vulnerable side to John that he does not often show to the world. The mouse signals that John might not be as shallow as he seems, though he might not realize this yet. Still, when his father comes home John defaults to impressing him by telling him about how he and Mike beat up the eighth grade quarterback, Eric Schultz.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Penn and Abby get along so well, and why do you think their friendship bothers John so much?



## Discussion Question 2

What do you make of John's reaction to the mouse sighting? How does this fit in with his inner thoughts and feelings versus the image he projects to the outside world?

## Discussion Question 3

How would you characterize John's relationship with his parents?

## Vocabulary

perky, draggy, shuffle, gawk, scowl, uppercut, hazardous, whiff, screech, sag



# Chapters 18-24

## Summary

Chapter 18 covers the football season opening game against Hillside East. John scores 6 touchdowns. He recounts his victory in a play-by-play narration describing how he shoved, pushed, and plowed into the other players over and over again. John is frustrated that his parents do not attend, especially when he sees that Penn's parents are in the stands. A second string player comes on the field to replace him, but John pushes him away. John keeps scoring until Coach Lattner physically comes and takes him off the field. He explains that he wanted to beat Hillside, not destroy them. John does not see what he did wrong, and everyone except Jane is cheering for him when he comes off the field. John is overjoyed to discover Scooter cooking in the kitchen when he comes home at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 19 the reader meets Scooter for the first time. John keeps asking him how long he is staying with them, and Scooter says he will be there "maybe for good." Scooter is proud of John for scoring 6 touchdowns. John's parents come home and confirm that Scooter will be staying with them permanently. Mr. Coogan is excited because Scooter is a terrific cook, much better than Mrs. Coogan. That night at dinner Scooter learns that Abby is a vegetarian but reserves judgment. John's mother shares her good news that the construction of a new mall means she will have more real estate business. John boasts of his new touchdown record. Abby arrives and greets Scooter. She is holding a handmade sign that says, "The Mall Must Fall."

Chapter 20 takes place later that night when Abby and John accompany Scooter up to his bedroom. They pepper him with questions and settle in for a night of storytelling. John expresses how safe and secure he feels in Scooter's bed, as if he can reveal any secret. In Chapter 21

Abby gets Scooter's take on her idea to build a wildlife habitat in the backyard. Scooter tells her to keep planning. John asks Scooter why his name is "Scooter," but Scooter's bland answer disappoints him. He also denies he has ever been in the Penn Relays in answer to John's question.

In Chapter 22 John tells readers that Scooter has come to his football practices. John and Mike notice that now other people are making fun of Penn for joining the cheerleading team. The boys go to a middle school dance. Mike teases John about how he has a crush on Jane, which John denies. Jane has said nothing to John since they started school. Jane stands out because she does not wear much makeup, and she is friends with Penn. To throw Mike off John turns to a random girl sitting near them and asks her to dance. She says "No," which motivates John to pursue Jane in Chapter 23.

John opens Chapter 23 by explaining that he had forgotten that "Life is football." Taking that approach, he finds Jane among her friends and awkwardly makes small talk. Jane





is uninterested in John's efforts and says "No" when he asks her to dance. He tells her that he is "...the answer to your dreams, baby," which sets Jane and her friends off into fits of laughter. When he tries to physically drag her on the dance floor she retaliates by insulting him and picking apart his ego: "You are the biggest jerk I ever met in my life" she says, adding, "You think you're so great...but you're just pathetic. You have a big mouth. You bully people around. You don't care about anybody's feelings. You're just a big, dumb, obnoxious jockstrap." John is aware that Jane is insulting him, but he does not care because he is so happy that she is finally talking to him. Then Penn Webb appears, and in Chapter 24 he gives Jane a "Stall the Mall" shirt. John tells him to stay away from Abby, but before a fight breaks out Jane leads Penn to the dance floor. On the way out of the dance John shoves Penn so hard he falls on the ground.

## Analysis

Chapter 18 proves how John struggles with moderating his behavior and especially his aggression. It enrages him that Mr. and Mrs. Webb are there in the stands to support Penn. Scoring touchdown after touchdown, John seems determined to make up for the fact that his parents did not attend. John does not know when to stop and has a hard time defining what a victory is; Coach Lattner says he wanted to win, not destroy the other team. John does not realize there is a difference between the two, nor that one is preferable to the other. It seems that most of the spectators do not see a problem either since they cheer for John as he walks off the field to the bench with the coach.

Scooter's arrival in Chapter 19 introduces a new central character and brings joy to John and Abby. John and Abby are both attached to Scooter, and John seems unable to accept that Scooter will be staying with them for good. He keeps finding new ways to ask the same question over again, wondering if Scooter is really going to be there permanently. When John tells Scooter that he was awesome in the game, Scooter tells him that he did not need to score 6 touchdowns for him to know that. This is a gentle lesson to John that not everyone is bowled over by John's athletic accomplishments. Moreover, he stands on his own qualities and does not need to prove anything to the adults close to him. Seeing as John seems only capable of breaking the silence between him and his father when he talks about his touchdowns or beating people up, this is a new concept John will have to work on. Spinelli hints at the tension to follow when Abby comes home with a sign that protests the construction of a new mall, the same mall that Mrs. Coogan spoke of as a business opportunity earlier. John and Abby find Scooter's presence comforting. They can admit whatever they want. When John asks Scooter about how he got his name, Scooter's answer is a kind of let down. John's question shows he is old enough to start wondering about a nickname you are given when you are a child shows that he is starting to wonder this about himself. Readers see early on that Scooter is supportive of his grandchildren. He encourages Abby to develop her wildlife habitat, and he also attends John's football practices and games.

The middle school dance shows how vast the distance is between John's understanding of his effect on other people and the actual reality as demonstrated in his interactions. First John shows how uneasy he is talking about his true feelings for Jane Forbes with



Mike. Mike teases him, and John denies that he has a crush on her. He is so desperate that he asks a random girl to dance, and she refuses him. This sobers John up enough to put him into Crash mode, and he reminds himself that life is like football. Since he is John "Crash" Coogan, touchdown record-holder and overall excellent athlete, John figures he can approach asking Jane to dance the same as he would go about scoring a touchdown, by applying momentum, force, and confidence that he will win. Jane's reaction to John's advances show John he absolutely misjudged how to smooth talk a girl. John not only insults her but also says outrageously clumsy pickup lines and answers. In return, Jane calls John out on being a loudmouth bully who is inconsiderate of other people's emotions at best, and she kicks him to get him to stop dragging her away. Although John is upset that Jane kicked him and overreacts, telling her that she could have injured him, John is just happy that Jane is talking to him after the silent treatment he had been getting since the start of school. Penn's appearance undercuts John's disastrous conversation with Jane and offers an undeniable contrast to how Penn gets along with Jane. Now defensive, John warns Penn to stay away from his sister. When John pushes Penn, this is as angry at Penn as we ever see him. Penn's easy confidence with standoffish Jane frustrates John because it proves that Penn is winning a game John cannot figure out - the game of befriending girls.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does John keep scoring even though his team is beating their opponent by a big margin? Does he recognize that what he did was wrong?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Scooter stand out from the other adults in John's life? Why is he so appealing to John? What would motivate John to ask Scooter how he got the name "Scooter"?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Abby's habitat project represent? Why do you think she wants to be a conservationist? How does this alienate Abby from her family?

## Vocabulary

plow, trot, huddle, ovation, wince, bulge, glop, clobber, coil, quake, swoon, habitat, smirk, floppy, splotch, rouge, nudge, dinky, obnoxious



# Chapters 25-30

## Summary

In Chapter 25, Scooter is one of the only people to watch the Upper Milford football game because it is pouring rain. John scores a touchdown, and after half time the cheerleading team is missing two cheerleaders; Penn and Jane abandon the game to go protest the new mall. Scooter walks John home, and in Chapter 26 Abby makes them turn on the TV so they can watch her being interviewed at the demonstration. Abby is quoted as saying that her mother buys her clothes at Second Time Around. The next day Mrs. Coogan pulls Abby aside and scolds her for protesting the mall since the mall would be a good thing for the family. She also reveals that she does not actually buy all Abby's clothes at Second Time Around because they are well-off enough that she does not have to. Abby puts Scooter's boxer shorts down and runs down the hall to find him. In Chapter 27 John breaks the school record for most touchdowns in a season. He is very proud and reads a newspaper story about his victory to Mike over the phone. Mr. and Mrs. Webb attend the game along with Penn even though Penn is no longer a cheerleader. Scooter sits with them and says that, "Those Webbs seem like nice people."

Chapters 28-30 cover Thanksgiving day. John's cousin Bridget and her father, Uncle Herm, come to Thanksgiving Dinner, which Scooter cooks as usual. John teases Abby about eating oysters since they are meat. Uncle Herm boasts of how he was the one who named John "Crash" after he plowed into Bridget one Christmas when he was a young boy. John does not get the reaction he wants out of Bridget, who is not fazed by him at all. John says that, apart from Uncle Herm telling the story over and over again, sometimes it does not feel like it happened at all. John closes the chapter with, "And then, in a way, it did again."

In Chapter 29 the family has a football scrimmage in the backyard. Mr. Coogan is not pleased with Abby's wood piles and attempts to convert the backyard into a nature habitat. The football game is a disaster because John tackles Scooter and very nearly knocks him out.

In Chapter 30 Mrs. Coogan finds a mouse in John's football bag. This makes John upset. John shares his regret over the tackle with the reader, admitting he was upset with Scooter for not making a proper video recording of his record-breaking football game. At the end of the day John sees that Scooter and Abby have switched beds. John realizes that Scooter looks old, and he feels uneasy about this.

## Analysis

Chapter 25 shows how Scooter is supportive of his grandchildren in a way Mr. and Mrs. Coogan are not. Neither of John's parents have been to one of his football games. Abby



is sure to hold their attention when she is filmed on television saying that she is against the mall and that her mother gets her clothes at Second Time Around. By now Abby knows that her mother would directly benefit from the new mall, yet Abby clings to a passionate hatred for the new mall. Perhaps one reason why she did not stop protesting the mall is that she suspects their mother will be gone even more each day if she has new business. Abby's tantrum after finding out that her mother lied about getting her clothes at Second Time Around shows how Abby tends to shift into extremes with her reactions to provocative revelations and events. Abby's mother does not recognize how serious Abby is about Second Time Around and seems unable to understand that she can buy thrift store clothes even if she does not do it to save money. Abby's mother does not see Second Time Around as a way to recycle clothing to conserve resources like Abby does. Yet Abby boasts of her mother getting her secondhand clothes as a point of pride to show that she is an eco-friendly, sustainable role model. Mrs. Coogan's revelation shatters that image.

Thanksgiving Day shows that there are some underlying hostilities lingering in John's character. Whereas normally he would be proud for having the name "Crash," on this day John does not feel like he really identifies with the name, at least not at first. John's choice to tackle Scooter and almost knock him out shows that John still feels he has to act a certain way since he is the Crash Man. John is still juggling the aggressive and competitive persona he is expected to be and the gentle, compassionate person he shows signs of becoming. All throughout "Crash" so far readers have seen how John's father rewards him with the little hints of affection he is capable of giving, yet here Mr. Coogan is horrified by John's behavior. John admits that perhaps he was feeling resentful of Scooter because Scooter did not properly tape his football game the other day. Another reason he is upset with Scooter could be that Scooter was sitting with Penn and his parents and noted that they were nice people. Yet another clue into John's behavior takes place later in Chapter 30 when he realizes how old Scooter looks. John measures just about everyone against himself and his power, and now Scooter shows that he is not capable of withstanding John's tackles. John is starting to learn that Scooter is not the perfect, strong, and physically fit person he once was. Indeed, his weakness is shown in the very next chapter.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you feel that Abby is sincere in her efforts at stopping the construction of the new mall?

## Discussion Question 2

Was it John's true intention to tackle Scooter so hard? What do you think he was hoping to prove? Why can he not separate the football field from the rest of life?



## Discussion Question 3

How would you describe John and Abby's relationship? What brings them together? What pushes them apart?

## Vocabulary

wallow, spectator, drenched, stubborn, bawl, sacrifice, hoist



# Chapters 31-35

## Summary

Chapter 31 advances the narrative to December and contains just five words: "Scooter is in the hospital."

In Chapter 32, John explains how he had heard Scooter hammering something in the backyard, but then John suddenly realized that the sounds had stopped. He and Abby discovered Scooter sitting against a tree. John later learns that Scooter had a stroke, and Scooter is admitted to the hospital. John is resentful because his family does not decorate the Christmas tree the way he would like. The Webbs come over one night with food, and for once Penn is not his cheery self. John wakes up on Christmas Eve and realizes he never bought Scooter a gift. He panics and thinks this means he does not expect him to live. He buys the first thing he sees at a shop, a pair of red, glittery high heels.

Meanwhile, in Chapter 33, Scooter's condition barely improves. Christmas is disappointing and just seems off without Scooter, and Abby and John fight with their parents about keeping their presents downstairs. John buy Scooter another present, but he does not know what to do with the shoes so he stashes them under his bed.

Chapter 34 takes place on New Year's day, and Mike comes over to compare gifts with John. Mike returns from getting something to eat in the kitchen and is wearing Scooter's sailor hat. This enrages John, who demands that Mike take the hat off. Mike does not see the problem and says, "He don't need it. He's old." John screams, "He's not old!" and takes the hat back to Scooter's room. John hears the doorbell and spies Penn on the porch holding a package. John does not answer the door, and eventually Penn leaves the package on the stoop and walks away. John retrieves the package and opens it. Inside he finds Penn's prized jar of Missouri River mud and a handwritten note addressed to Scooter.

In Chapter 35 John is back at school. He tells Mike he is not interested in pranking Penn to trick him into eating meat. Jane Forbes tells John she is sorry to hear about his grandfather. When John visits Scooter in the rehab center, he does not recognize him. Scooter is frail, silent, and alarmingly thin. On the way home, Abby says she hopes Scooter is better by her birthday on February 1st because she wants him to cook her catfish cakes. At home, John goes into the backyard and checks out Abby's old dollhouse, which has been converted into a "Mouse House" with furniture inside for the mouse. The next morning John discovers that the tiny piece of pizza on the miniature table in the mouse house is gone.



## Analysis

These chapters depict a few turning points in "Crash," starting with when Scooter has a stroke and goes in the hospital. After Scooter has his stroke, John realizes that life may never be the same. Scooter made life special for the Coogans and brought a liveliness and spirit to the house that disappears when he is absent. John never comes right out and complains to his family that he is unhappy with them, which is why his reaction to the under decorated Christmas tree signal his frustration simmering under the surface. John angrily dreams of when he and Mike will be living together and can decorate a tree however they want. Yet whereas Penn Webb and his parents generously bring the Coogans food, Mike's reaction to Scooter's stroke shows the distance growing more apparent between John and Mike. Mike grabs Scooter's hat and wears it because to him Scooter is just "old" and does not need it anymore. His dismissal of Scooter is indicative of Mike's larger prejudice against people who are less physically powerful than he is. Meanwhile, John is forced to accept that Scooter might not be the larger-than-life and energetic man he once was. Mike devalues Scooter for his age, which touches on a nerve for John because in Chapter 30 he was very bothered by seeing Scooter sleeping in Abby's room because Scooter: "...was just about as old as anybody I ever saw." John is partly concerned that he jinxed Scooter into his stroke, and his guilt drives him to buy Scooter something for Christmas to prove to the world that he still believes Scooter will be alive to receive it. Thus Mike's actions and statements unknowingly prey upon John's secret anxieties. The sincerity evident in Penn's note and gift of the Missouri River Mud offer a stark contrast between his empathetic reaction to Scooter's stroke whereas Mike is much more callous. As the narrative goes on and John is forced to align himself with either Penn or Mike, Penn's gesture sticks in John's mind. At school John stops pranking Penn, and Jane makes an effort to talk to him showing that she is moved to speak with him when the topic of conversation is compassion and not awkward flirtation.

Chapter 35's visit to the rehab center offers another example of how John realizes Scooter is likely not going to recover to the strength and coordination he once had. John does not even recognize Scooter at first and is unsure of how to approach him. Certainly Scooter's condition forces John to confront mortality and the alarming reality that eventually he will lose his Crash Man physical power. For someone as physically dominant and powerful as John, this is a frightening awakening. Abby clings to hope that Scooter will be better for her birthday because it is the only way she can process the tragedy. John's efforts with the Mouse House show how John's sense of perspective is changing. While John fears that Scooter will never recover, he does not fear the mouse as much anymore. Scooter's stroke forces him to put his fears into context of what really scares him.

## Discussion Question 1

How does John's desperate search for Scooter's Christmas present demonstrate how afraid he is?



## Discussion Question 2

Is John's fight with Mike the first sign readers see that their friendship is imperfect? Why does Mike's decision to wear Scooter's sailor hat bother John so much?

## Discussion Question 3

What represents the turning point in John's perception of Penn? Why does John start to view him in a more sympathetic and protective way?

## Vocabulary

pester, dangle, klutz, jabber, clammy, forked, jagged





# Chapters 36-38

## Summary

Chapter 36 takes place on Abby's birthday. John has made a "Happy Birthday, Abby" sign for her and tried his best to recreate Scooter's catfish cakes (essentially just brownies), but this upsets Abby. Earlier that day Mike brings his Jetwater Uzi water gun to school because he intends to soak Penn with it. John tells him that he is going to be suspended, which annoys Mike. Mike observes that John is acting different and that he is a "dud" but backs off and takes it back when John grabs his shirt. Later John walks past Mike spraying Penn with the water gun while Penn does not fight back. John realizes that something has changed with him and that perhaps he is no longer the Crash Man he thought he was. At the end of the night John finds a note from Abby apologizing for her behavior and thanking him for the catfish cakes.

In Chapter 37 the family goes to see Scooter, who has made little progress besides being able to say the word "A-bye." On the way home, the Coogans reflect on Scooter's loss of language, but Abby says she is going to look on it in a positive way now that Scooter is able to say something at all. That night, after dinner, John hears someone running around the neighborhood. He sees that it is Penn and is worried that somebody is chasing him. Penn was absent from school for two days after the water gun incident. However, Penn walks calmly back to his house. John turns around and goes inside to avoid him.

In Chapter 38 Mrs. Coogan asks John about the red shoes, and he tells her about why he bought them for Scooter. John's mother tells him that the shoes are from the Second Time Around thrift store that John hates so much. She tells him he does not have to worry about if Scooter will die, more if he will recover and how much. John saw signs that Scooter has improved the last time they went to see him. John gives Abby pointers on how to encourage the mouse to stay in the Mouse House, saying that if she moves it back farther it will be cozier for the mouse just like his football bag. John notes that every night of the week Penn sprints past their house.

## Analysis

In these chapters readers see that Abby and John still feel strained by the aftermath of Scooter's stroke. Abby's reaction to the catfish cakes demonstrates how she feels John was trying to replace Scooter. Abby later recognizes how irrational this is and apologizes. Scooter's stroke continues to shape John's relationships as his friendship with Mike approaches a near breaking point. John's refusal to take place in Mike's water gun prank is a departure from his old attitude of being complacent in Mike's bullying. When Mike challenges him by calling him a "dud" he seems to have forgotten how powerful John is and backs down once John gets physical and grabs his shirt. The readers have seen what John can do when he is angry--such as express his feelings of frustration



with his parents by plowing down opponents on the football field and pushing Penn at the dance--but Mike seems to have temporarily forgotten this. Yet John realizes that he has changed. John senses that he and the Crash Man might not be the same person anymore: "I had always thought my name and me were the same thing. Now there was a crack of daylight between them, like my shell was coming loose. It was scary." John's words show that he does not feel as secure without his Crash Man persona. If John was ever a "loose cannon" like the vice principal said he was, now he fits the description even more. Spinelli clues the readers in that John's actions might seem inconsistent with the John readers have known so far.

In the family visit to see Scooter readers see Scooter has lost one of his defining characteristics: his love of language. Before the stroke Scooter would constantly joke around with Abby and John by using navy and sailor slang terms, and he was an engaging and eloquent storyteller. Now Scooter can say just one thing, "A-bye." Although disappointed, Abby and Mrs. Coogan argue that this is a positive improvement and focus on the things he can do. Meanwhile back home John hears Penn running past the house. By automatically assuming that Penn is being chased by someone, John associates Penn with someone who is weak and unable to stand up for themselves. Here though John seems to be suggesting that he might protect Penn from assailants. John's views on Penn are changing, and his conversation with his mother about the shoes expand upon this growth. When John realizes that the shoes were from *Second Time Around* he does not throw them away or overreact; rather, it gives him something to think about. John's reflection on Mrs. Coogan's reassurances that Scooter will live but might not recover show that he is starting to understand that it is possible to make peace with the tragedy and accept and love Scooter despite his limitations. John's hesitant efforts to help the mouse in the backyard and his newfound interest in Penn's safety suggest that he is starting to look on others who are less powerful than he with more compassion as well as overcome his phobia of mice. In other words, John is growing up and maturing.

## Discussion Question 1

How are Abby and John expressing their sorrow over Scooter's condition? How has Scooter's stroke changed things?

## Discussion Question 2

How has Scooter changed since the stroke? How has he remained the same?

## Discussion Question 3

What would you guess is the reason Penn is running around the neighborhood at night? How would you characterize John's reaction to discovering Penn's nighttime jogging sessions?

## Vocabulary

blubbered, dud, gulp, tilted, snoop



# Chapters 39-42

## Summary

In Chapter 39 John describes an incident that happened that day in English class. The students were assigned an essay to write about someone they know. John wrote about Scooter. During class, Mike steals Penn's essay, crumples it into a ball, and throws it at John. John catches it and reads the essay during class. Penn's essay is about his great-grandfather, Henry Wilhide Webb III, who he is very close to and who will be coming to visit soon. Penn writes of his secret hope that his great-grandfather will be able to see him race in the Penn Relays. At the end of class John returns Penn's essay to him. John tells the reader that track signups are the next day. In Chapter 40 John talks about how Abby scared a ChemLawn weedkiller technician off their property. This infuriates their father who wants to get rid of the weeds in the backyard. Abby says they are necessary for the wildlife habitat.

Track season is beginning in Chapter 41. John explains that one of the things that is unusual about him is he is both big and fast. Naturally, he excels at track and beats everyone including the eighth graders in a race. Penn comes in second place, impressing their coach and John. John observes that the Mouse House is barely visible in the backyard and that the ChemLawn technician has not returned. In Chapter 42, John helps rescue Penn's turtle from Mike. Jane comes up to John during the day and shows him a ransom note about Penn's turtle. John denies any involvement, but he is positive it is Mike so he goes to Mike's house and seizes the turtle. Mike challenges John, confused and angry now that John seems to be aligning himself with Penn. When he is provoked by Mike, John shoves Mike so hard that Mike falls down. John walks out the door and returns the turtle to the Webbs' doorstep. Meanwhile, the spark plug has gone missing from Mr. Coogan's lawnmower.

## Analysis

Approaching the end of the novel, the reader sees that John has made an absolute departure from his friendship with Mike. From giving Penn his essay back to rescuing Penn's turtle from Mike, John shows that he truly is breaking away from his narrow-minded phobias of being aligned with someone who is "different." His friendship with Mike was on its last legs before the turtle kidnapping, but from here on out there is no going back. Without Mike John seems nearly friendless. In truth, John isolates people with his bullying and reputation for being a jock. John proudly boasted in Chapter 15 that, "I'm so popular I could probably be school president," but throughout "Crash" we have only seen John with a few of his peers. Thus by ending his friendship with Mike John is truly venturing into new unknown, friendless territory.

By leaving the turtle on the Webbs' doorstep John echoes earlier in the book when he left the meatball on their doorstep. Whereas leaving the meatball was an immature



attempt at provoking the Webbs, leaving the turtle there is an action driven by John's growing respect for Penn and his desire to help him. When he reads Penn's essay John is clued into how he and Penn both share an affection for an older relative since he wrote about Scooter and Penn wrote about his great-grandfather. Penn learns of the "gift" that Penn hopes for, to have his great-grandfather run in the Penn Relays. Penn is aware of his great-grandfather's age and mortality. After Scooter's stroke John has a newfound appreciation for aging and mortality. Meanwhile, Penn shows promise on the track field. Penn shows that he is a natural athlete, just like John, and Spinelli sets up the competition between them in the climactic scene. Even John admits how fast Penn is. John's mind is changing about a lot of things. For instance, it is implied that John is the one helping Abby thwart their father's plans to tame the backyard by stealing the spark plug from Mr. Coogan's lawnmower. John joins Abby's rebellion partially because he is starting to be more openminded about Abby's conservation causes.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Penn's description of his great-grandfather compare with John's description of Scooter?

## Discussion Question 2

Is John modest about his athletic abilities? How does his confidence both help and hinder him socially?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Mike's kidnapping of Penn's turtle is the ultimate downfall of his friendship with John? Why does this motivate John to end their friendship and help Penn?

## Vocabulary

gape, reel, plow, lecture, accuse, flare, whine



# Chapters 43-49

## Summary

John opens Chapter 43 by announcing the good news: Scooter is back at home.

Chapter 44 introduces the Penn Relays track event in more detail. The track coach shows footage from Penn Relay events of the past to John and his teammates. The middle school team will race on Friday, and they have never won in sixteen years of attending the relays. The coach gives priorities to the upperclassmen, so Springfield's team will be made up of all eighth graders except for one open spot to be won in a race-off on Wednesday. Back home, John explains that Scooter lives on the first floor now. Scooter uses a walker, and even though John and Abby sometimes relax on his bed with him, he still only says "A-bye." John notes that while they still have the bed boat, now he and Abby are the captains, which feels less safe.

In Chapter 45 John's mother tells him that she is reducing her hours at work to be just part-time. She makes John, Abby, and Scooter dinner, and they talk about how now Mrs. Coogan will need to buy some things at the Second Time Around thrift store. John is initially reluctant, saying he will not wear underwear or sneakers from Next Time Around, but when Mrs. Coogan tucks him in at the end of the night he says just don't tell him if she gets things for him there. John is nervous about the race-off tomorrow and notices that Penn has not said anything to him. Mr. Coogan's lawn efforts continue to be sabotaged by his children.

Chapter 46 starts off with John's extended fantasy of helping the Springfield track team win at the Penn Relays. Later, at the race-off John sees that Penn's great-grandfather is in attendance along with Mr. and Mrs. Webb. Everybody watches a hawk fly overhead, and John takes this as a sign that he must be the one to deliver a "gift": a victory for Penn. During the race-off, John is about to win but at the last moment tells Penn to "Lean" so he can break the tape first.

Chapter 47 describes the aftermath of John's deliberate loss to Penn. He regrets it having never lost before. On Friday, John and his classmates hear over the loudspeaker that the Springfield team came in second place with Penn running the final leg and saving them from last place. John's fellow students are excited, but John can only cheer inside.

In Chapter 48, Mrs. Coogan discovers that Scooter has abandoned his walker and gone up to the second floor where he looks at his portrait. Mrs. Coogan talks about the story behind the portrait and how growing up she thought she would forget what Scooter looked like. John's mother reveals she feared the same thing would happen to her children. John is not surprised that Scooter walked up to the second floor since he put some of the Missouri Mud paste on his big toe.



Chapter 49 is set in July. John reflects on how much has changed. His mother has resumed painting with the paints John bought her and is much more budget conscious. The backyard is as wild as ever. John is invited to a party at Jane's. Penn is his best friend.

## Analysis

Now that he is back home, Scooter's physical condition offers a contrast to John's athletic abilities. While John can outrun just about everyone he has ever met and is at a prime physical condition, Scooter needs a walker and cannot go upstairs. John and Abby feel less safe steering their nightly conversations with Scooter on the boat-bed because they are confronted with the reality that Scooter is somewhat helpless. This scene is symbolic of Scooter passing the proverbial baton on to Abby and John. John and Abby are forced to confront a harsh reality that many young people are sheltered from so early in life, that one day their position with their elders will reverse and they will be the one taking care of their parents as they regress into helplessness and reduced mobility.

Much of Chapter 44 sets the stakes underlying the climactic scene of the novel, the race-off. John finally understands why the Penn Relays are such a big deal for Penn after seeing footage. John wants to win a spot on the relay team and envisions himself winning the race for the team at the Penn Relays. Yet at the track John sees how Penn's parents and Penn's great-grandfather are in attendance. When everyone sees the hawk fly over, something clicks with John and he believes he is the "gift" that can give Penn's great-grandfather the opportunity to see his great-grandson race in the Penn Relays. John also has his recent experience with Scooter to keep in mind. Scooter has attended many of John's practices and games and said he does not need John to prove he is awesome by scoring a bunch of touchdowns. Penn's great-grandfather, however, has not seen Penn have a victory, and what's more, if Penn were to win the race-off he would live up to his name "Penn." Thus, John does something he initially thinks he is incapable of: he loses, on purpose. After the race is over John cannot bring himself to congratulate Penn, and it feels strange to lose. In fact, John regrets it, but John eventually does cheer for Penn's victory, albeit on the inside.

Mrs. Coogan seems to also have a newfound appreciation for the preciousness of time since she reduces her hours at work to spend more time at home. Although she will be losing some of her income, Mrs. Coogan seems happy with this choice. In Chapter 48 she tells John about how she painted Scooter's portrait from memory when she was a teenage. This makes her think of her current situation.. "I was thinking how little I saw you kids, and how little you saw me," she explains, adding, "And there was a minute back then when I actually was afraid you might forget what I look like." Mrs. Coogan explains that she thought of this right before she told her boss she was going to work part-time. By the end of the novel, Mr. Coogan has not shown any signs of being any more involved in his children's lives. If Scooter's stroke has any positive effect, perhaps it is that now Abby and John will have one of their parents home during the formative years of their lives. John seems to recognize this and accepts that they will have to



make do with less money and secondhand clothing. By agreeing to let his mother buy some of his clothes at Second Time Around John demonstrates more awareness that money sometimes needs to be sacrificed for the greater good. Spinelli hints that perhaps John is starting to better understand Mrs. Webb's cryptic statement about being rich in a lot of ways that did not involve having money.

In the novel's final chapter John says how much has changed, almost all positive. John has overcome his fear of being associated with people who are "different" and has a more nuanced understanding of a family's economy and what makes a family wealthy. His mother is spending more time with her children, and there is even a chance that he and Jane Forbes could be friends. Most important, the reader closes the book knowing that John has matured beyond his name "Crash." He has come up with his own definition for his character and life.

## Discussion Question 1

How do Penn's parents contrast with John's parents? Why does John still feel both attracted to and repelled by the Webbs?

## Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Penn say anything to John? How does his concentration on winning differ from John's mental preparation before a big event?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the "gift" that John envisions? Why does he think it his responsibility to give it to the world?

## Vocabulary

bonkers, grope, pose, baton, mill, coiled, stride, suspicious





# Characters

## John "Crash" Coogan

John Coogan is the narrator of "Crash" and its main character. "Crash" takes place mostly over the course of John's seventh grade year, and the novel follows John on his journey of maturity from someone whose opinions, actions, and emotions are determined by his "Crash Man" personality into someone whose identity is driven by his own motivations. John opens "Crash" by explaining the background behind his nickname, "Crash." He got the nickname when he was just a little kid for an incident he can barely remember--knocking over his cousin Bridget one Christmas while wearing his new football helmet. Everybody calls John "Crash," including his parents.

Throughout the novel, John sees the nickname as both a reason and an excuse to act a certain way. To John, the Crash Man persona justifies being overly aggressive on the football field and in interactions with his peers. He believes that he can just crash into things and win through a combination of force, physical intimidation, and treating life as he would football. Since John has always been the strongest and fastest kid he's ever known, John believes he can approach any situation as he would football and succeed. However, this often backfires, such as with his conversations with Jane and when he tackles his grandfather, Scooter, on Thanksgiving.

Penn Webb, the one person who does not call him Crash, starts out as a peculiar peer new to the neighborhood and gradually over the course of the book becomes John's best friend. Penn irks John at first because Penn is so sure of himself and his seemingly unusual beliefs, such as his Quaker-influenced environmental activism and nonviolence and non-confrontational approach to violence. Indeed, Penn remains this way for the entirety of the book. This is not done to make Penn a static character but rather to make him a foil for John. Their eventual friendship is built on mutual emotional support and newfound shared beliefs. Moreover, Penn already gets along with Abby and influences her passion for conservation, and John helps Abby by sabotaging their father's efforts to have the backyard tamed.

To that end, John is a study in contradictions. His morals and conscious make bullying other kids difficult to him, even though it is expected and encouraged by Mike Deluca. John also is terrified of mice, harmless creatures that pose no real threat to him. John is deeply attached to his grandfather, Scooter, and seems to regress into childhood when Scooter comes to visit and regales Abby and John with his stories. Ultimately, what sets John apart from the Crash Man is the climactic scene of the novel when John chooses to allow Penn to win the spot on the Penn Relays team. By letting Penn win, John demonstrates that he has grown up and grown out of his Crash nickname. John finally allows himself to be second-best, an action which reflects maturity and grace.



## Penn Webb

Penn Webb moves from North Dakota to Pennsylvania in the summer before first grade. Eager to please and almost abrasively friendly, Penn Webb forces John to confront everything he thinks he knows about social conformity. John can tell there is something "off" about Penn from their first conversation when Penn accepts every blatant lie John tells him at face value. Penn defies every expectation John has for another kid his age. For example, anyone would back down from his challenges and stand aside or quake in fear. Penn fascinates John, and in spite of himself John goes over to Penn's house for dinner and plays with him. From the Quaker pacifism, to the Flickertail Squirrel buttons, to the lack of toys in the abnormally small house, Penn's quirks provoke John to leave a meatball on his doorstep, an action that is echoed later when John leaves Penn's rescued turtle on his front porch. By the end of the "Then" segment that opens the novel John has accepted Penn's eccentricities and respects him enough to leave him alone, though his new friend Mike Deluca does not agree and begins a quest to make Penn's life miserable.

Penn's athletic potential is shown in his running speed and endurance. John and Penn both join the track team, but both boys have different approaches towards the sport. John compares track to being like football, something he can win by applying force and a competitive edge. Penn, on the other hand, seems to thrive on the track team not just because he is a talented runner who is dedicated to his training but also because track and field is non-confrontational and does not include violence. Penn is motivated to succeed and win a spot on the Penn Relays team because he wants to impress his grandfather and give him the gift of seeing his great-grandson race in the same sporting event he did. Penn is close to his great-grandfather in a similar way to John's attachment to Scooter. John knows that they share a bond with an older relative, and this becomes a factor that influences his decision to lose the race on purpose and let Penn win.

In contrast to John, Penn Webb does not undergo any big changes in his character or personality. One of the central storylines of "Crash" is the exploration of how John's relationship to his nickname changes over the course of the book. While people and situations change around John--Scooter's descent into frailty, his mother's reduction in work hours, and the escalating severity of Mike's bullying efforts--Penn Webb remains a constant. At the end of the novel Penn is as steadfast in his beliefs as ever. He remains a generous friend and passionate environmentalist whose Quaker religions maintains prominence and influence in his life. Perhaps John thinks if he embraces Penn as a friend he will be aligned with someone who is not going to undergo radical changes that would upset the status quo. In other words, Penn is a considerate and compassionate friend who radiates stability, loyalty, and constancy. It is no wonder John clings to certainties in the face of so many shifting situations.



## Scooter

One of the first clues the reader gets that Scooter is an extremely important person in John's life is that John proudly boasts of Scooter to Penn the first time they meet. Scooter is a cook in the U.S. Navy, a point of pride for the Coogan family and especially for John. John also brags about Scooter to the Webbs when he goes over for dinner. Now in seventh grade, John is overjoyed when Scooter, now retired, hints that he is staying for good. Mrs. Coogan confirms this to John's delight. Everyone in the family seems to get along with Scooter, who jokes around and is an exceptional cook.

Scooter is supportive of his grandchildren, encouraging Abby to create a thoughtful plan for making the backyard a wildlife refuge. He is also the only adult from the Coogan family to go to one of John's football games. Scooter's early life and wild escapades in the navy do not at first seem to parallel John and Abby's situation with their absent parents. At one point during the novel, Scooter points out a portrait of a sailor on the wall in the Coogan's house. John and Abby are astonished that this is Scooter in his younger years. Later, in the final pages Mrs. Coogan reveals that this was the first portrait that she ever did, and she did it from memory since Scooter was away a lot of the time on naval duties when she was growing up. Spinelli allows the reader to make the subtle connection between Scooter and John's parents, who are also away a lot of the time at work. Spinelli seems to be suggesting that even though parents might be away working for a lot of the time, they are still with their children in spirit and do not love them any less.

With his outrageous and over-the-top stories, Scooter bewitches John and Abby each night, much to their glee. Scooter at first seems larger than life to the reader. Spinelli soon sets the record straight. Scooter exhibits signs that he is aging, such as when John tackles him during their Thanksgiving Day family football scrimmage and Scooter is slow to get up. This is one of the reasons why Scooter's stroke and the subsequent deterioration of his physical and verbal skills is heartbreaking for the Coogans. True to his "Crash Man" mentality, John expects the people around him to be strong, especially Scooter, who seems like he has traveled the world, had many unbelievable experiences, and done things John could only hope to do. Scooter's stroke brings Penn and John together since Penn knows how much Scooter means to John. John is touched by Penn's kind gesture of giving away his Missouri River Mud. John even shows some faith in Penn--and some desperation for progress--by dipping Scooter's toe in the mud mixture. Remarkably, Scooter walks to the second floor of the house, therefore leaving Scooter's fate open-ended.

## Abby Coogan

Abby is John's younger sister. Even from a young age Abby shows she has a strong personality. She is first seen digging around in the Coogans' garden when she is four years old. John is impressed that she gets her hands dirty and believes this is not typical girl behavior. He expects she will grow out of it. When the novel brings readers



up to present day during John's seventh grade year the reader sees that Abby and Penn have become good friends. Abby has absorbed some of Penn's causes and beliefs. She intends to create a wildlife habitat for animals in their backyard, tries to eat a vegetarian diet, and is a vocal opponent to the construction of the new mall, so much so that she appears on TV. It might seem that Abby is just blindly following Penn, but Abby is quite adamant about her positions and remains consistent with her beliefs throughout the novel.

Abby and John bond over the absence of their parents. Abby recognizes that her family situation is unconventional. For example, she notes with surprise and delight that all four of them finally ate a meal together, "Just like a real family." Like John, Abby is closer to her mother. Abby and John spend more time together once Scooter comes to stay with them. John and Abby feel so comfortable in Scooter's presence that they feel safe trying out opinions and tossing ideas out to get their grandfather's take on them. Abby asks Scooter for his thoughts on her plan to convert the backyard into a wildlife refuge. Scooter's encouragement helps Abby gain the confidence she will need for her adolescence while her beliefs, opinions, and moral issues settle into a more permanent character. One of the ways readers know John cares about his little sister is his attempt to cheer her up by attempting to cook Scooter's "Catfish cakes" for her birthday. Abby is upset by this gesture because she feels John is trying to replace Scooter, but ultimately she apologizes. By the end of the novel, now that Abby and John are both friends with Penn, there is hope that Abby and John will become even closer.

## Mike Deluca

When he transfers to Springfield's middle school in sixth grade, Mike Deluca instantly hits it off with John. Sizing him up to make sure he is not another Penn Webb, John demands to know if he is from North Dakota. Mike is defensive, and the two boys escalate their questions into a mutual challenge of who will back down first, until both boys dissolve into laughter. It seems that Mike and John will be great friends since they share so much in common: both want to be pro football players, both eat a lot of food, and both are from Pennsylvania. As time goes on the two boys become best friends. Yet Mike and John differ in a few crucial ways.

First, Mike is much more of a bully than John. Whereas John is suspicious of - but ultimately curious about - Penn Webb, Mike sees him as an outcast who needs to be targeted and demoralized. John describes Mike watching Penn when he sees him for the first time as, "It was like watching a cat watching a squirrel." Indeed Mike's behavior towards Penn could be characterized as predatory. John's pranks towards Penn and the Webbs are relatively harmless and stem more from fascination at how different Penn is from John. Leaving a meatball on the Webbs doorstep and deliberately feeding Penn false information is not as detrimental to his wellbeing as when Mike and John squeeze condiments into Penn's shoes or deceptively try to act like they are friends with Penn. Mike and John finally diverge when Mike announces his intention to drench Penn with a water gun. Although John does not directly intervene and prevent this, he refuses to take part and angers Mike by telling him that he will be suspended if he carries on with



his plan. John finds strength to stand up to Mike when Mike steals Penn's turtle. By this point their friendship is over.

Second, John never lets Mike forget that he is the superior athlete. John and Mike tease each other and get into mock fights several times, but Mike and John never go so far as to physically harm each other. Their disagreements are more showmanship driven by competing testosterone heavy aggression than actual animosity, at least until Mike steals Penn's turtle. Mike backs down when John's body language tells him he is not kidding around. Never far from their friendship is the fact that John is physically stronger than Mike and could easily overpower him. Frustrated that his new friend is not blindly conforming to his plans to prank Penn, Mike demands to know, "What's the matter with you?" John chooses not to define how he has changed and instead challenges Mike to "Figure it out" on his own. As John accepts that he does not have to be the Crash Man, his friendship with Mike falls apart once it is exposed for being propped up on a shaky foundation of competition.

## Lorraine Coogan

Lorraine Coogan, John and Abby's mother, is a larger presence in "Crash" than their father. When John meets Penn for the first time he tells him that his mother works and goes to school. Later Mrs. Coogan works in a real estate office. She comes home and is visibly exhausted. Yet at the same time she laments not having much to do at work. She sees the new mall as an opportunity to boost her income and be busier. Although they never talk about it with each other, John and Abby wish their mother was home more. Abby could be protesting against building the new mall at least partially because her mom would not be gone from the house. Mrs. Coogan gave up her early passion for painting when she went back to work. When Mrs. Coogan voluntarily reduces her hours down to part-time at the end of the novel, Abby suggests that she take up painting again. John also encourages her to paint again by using his sneaker money to buy her new paints. In the final pages of "Crash," Mrs. Coogan seems more comfortable. She embraces her family's new economic reality as a necessary sacrifice of spending more time with her aging father and her growing children. She even buys her family tickets to a baseball game. Spinelli leaves readers with hope that Mrs. Coogan will unite her family and be a more present and consistent presence in her children's lives.

## Mr. Coogan

Mr. Coogan is much more absent from the narrative than Mrs. Coogan. Whereas John and Abby's mother experiences a transformation throughout "Crash" and makes a decision to spend more time with her family, Mr. Coogan embraces a 70-hour-a-week lifestyle from the time John is a kid up until present day. During the summer before first grade, John asks if they can go to a baseball game. Mr. Coogan says no because he is too busy. This is indicative of the overall pattern Mr. Coogan also suffers from the same exhaustion as Mrs. Coogan. John describes their fatigue as a "sag." John is resentful yet accepts that this is the way it is for his family. Still, John longs for more time with his



parents, or at least have the time with them be more pleasant and positive. "Sometimes I wish we could turn the day upside down so that their main time at home would be in the morning, before they get all worn out. I'll tell you, at the end of a day it doesn't take much to crush a parent," he says. John also feels a little afraid of his father, and when he asks him to come to his football game he braces himself for a rejection. John is ashamed that he asks, confessing that, "I wanted to kill myself. Why did I have to put him through that? All I had to do was mention the date, let it go at that. I punched myself under the table." Mr. Coogan nods and indicates he will come, yet he does not. This upsets John and no doubt contributes to his aggressive need to keep scoring touchdowns, almost as if he wants to be able to later make his father feel guilty about what he missed by not attending the game.

In general, John's father is not an especially dynamic character. He does not change his behavior throughout the novel. He is still a workaholic who is detached from his family. In the final chapter Spinelli echoes John's earlier request to go to a baseball game by having Mrs. Coogan buy tickets for her family to go. She insists that their father will be there, but the reader--and John--have strong reason to doubt this. Perhaps John will never have an easy relationship with his father. Spinelli offers John some consolation in the form of John's mother, who will be embarking on a new chapter of her life as her relationship with her children deepens.

## Jane Forbes

Jane Forbes both captivates and mystifies Mike and John at the same time. When they first see her and realize she is new, John and Mike try to place her and then later guess her name. Jane, who John describes as "beautiful" and a "goddess," has such an arresting presence that John tells Mike he is now interested in girls. John summons confidence to go talk to her, but she does not seem too interested in John. John and Mike try to outdo each other at lunch by staking a claim on Jane's affection, but Jane is not really taken with either of them. She says hardly anything to John over the first few months of school and by and large ignores him. Instead of dissuading John from pursuing her further, Jane's behavior rather encourages him, and he finds that he likes her more than ever. She does indeed go out for cheerleading, but in a surprising twist befriends Penn. At the dance she rejects John several times. John is unable to understand that she might not want him, and even when she calls him "pathetic" and "the biggest jerk I ever met in my life" and tells him that, "You bully people around. You don't care about anybody's feelings. You're just a big, dumb, obnoxious jockstrap" he is happy instead of insulted. John sees their conversation as progress because she is finally talking to him.

Jane is a big mystery for John. She is a throw he cannot catch, a touchdown he cannot make. He expects his Crash Man mentality will charm her, but instead it backfires and she is disgusted with him. John's conversations with Jane are awkward and even painful to read since John does not understand what he is doing wrong. John even snaps and threatens her and tries to physically drag her on the dance floor as he reverts back to aggressive behavior. In contrast Penn and Jane become good friends. Their



friendship shows John that Penn has more social graces than John. By befriending Jane, Penn has one victory over John. In the final chapter of the novel John notes that he was invited to a Fourth of July party at Jane Forbes' house. Once John aligns himself with Penn, ditches Mike, and adopts a kinder and more compassionate approach to life, Jane sees the good in him.

## Coach Lattner

Coach Lattner is the Springfield middle school football coach. In October, Springfield plays Hillside and win the game by 32 points thanks in large part to John, who scores six touchdowns. After John scores for the sixth time, Coach Lattner pulls John from the game, saying he is benching him for the first quarter of their next game. He tells John that he wants Springfield to beat Hillside not "destroy" them. John is confused and angry; John is used to people encouraging him to be aggressive and competitive. Indeed, during the football team's first practice Coach Lattner and the other coaches seem excited that John, Mike, and Schultz get into a fight because it shows they are strong and hungry for action. No doubt John sees this as mixed signals, and even though he is ejected from the game and benched for part of the next one Coach Lattner's punishment does not really make an impression on him. In future games John does not hold back and eventually sets a school record for most touchdowns in a season. By and large Coach Lattner's lesson about not showing off and using your abilities and talents in moderation does not have an impact on John.

## Henry Wilhide Webb III

Henry Wilhide Webb III is Penn's great-grandfather. Henry won a relay race at the Penn Relays in 1919 and was the one who named Penn. Henry lives in North Dakota just as Penn and his family do until the opening of the novel when they move to Pennsylvania. Penn is clearly very attached to his great-grandfather, and he chooses to write about him for his essay on someone important to him. Henry is presented as a larger than life character. He dove to the bottom of the Missouri River and brought back mud, which he later gave to his great-grandson. Henry and Scooter have some things in common, including the bond they share with someone from a much younger generation and a gift for storytelling. Indeed, John even says that they would have liked each other, since they were both storytellers, both came from flat areas (Henry the prairie and Scooter the ocean), and both supported Penn and John when nobody else did. John wonders if Penn feels safe in Henry's bed like he does in Scooter's. When John reads Penn's essay and discovers that it is Penn's hope to be able to have his great-grandfather see him race in the Penn Relays, John decides to help him and considers himself the "gift" that will facilitate this.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Sports

For John, sports are where he dominates. John seemingly writes his destiny from an early age when he knocks his cousin down one Christmas while wearing his new football helmet. From that moment on he is known as "Crash" Coogan to everyone except Penn Webb. In some ways John's early physical actions do indeed reflect his life to come; John dominates on the football field, and he is unstoppable. He is unable to restrain himself from scoring touchdown after touchdown to the point where it is excessive and unsportsmanlike. John later explains his strengths, calling himself the Fastest Kid in his neighborhood, school, and town. Adults like the vice principal write off John and Mike's fight because they are leaders on the football team and it is expected that they will take the team far. Thus he is untouchable on the field and off. He approaches everything from the viewpoint of football, even saying "Life is football" to motivate him to approach getting Jane to dance with him as the equivalent as winning a game. He feels that being aggressive and ostentatious on as well as off the field will lead to a clean victory.

John and Mike are horrified when Penn Webb goes out for cheerleading. For John and Mike, and for John's parents as well, this is deeply offensive to the unspoken code of conventional masculinity. John accepts Penn's choice more than Mike since John reminds his friend that there are male cheerleaders in college. Surprising to John, Penn is eventually kicked off the team because he and Jane Forbes were missing practice to organize the protest against the new mall. Penn definitely puzzles John since John could never charm Jane yet Penn easily befriends Jane and recruits her to his cause. Jane represents a game John cannot figure out how to win.

## Scooter's Bed

John describes Scooter's bed as "...the safest place in the world, like a boat in a sea of crocs." John and Abby feel like they can say whatever they want in the bed because it is a judgment-free zone. For example, Scooter encourages Abby in her hopes to turn the backyard into a wildlife refuge. John also admits that when he was a young boy he had a confession that he waited weeks to make until Scooter came to visit and he felt like he could admit his wrongdoing in Scooter's bed and not be judged. When he is in Scooter's bed listening to Scooter's outrageous stories John allows himself to be afraid and loosen up his emotions a little bit. The person John is in Scooter's bed does not fit in with the brave, intimidating, and courageous Crash Man the rest of the world expects him to be. From what the reader sees, in Scooter's bed John does not have to be brave. He can feel and act vulnerable.





## Missouri River Mud

When John first meets Penn during the summer before first grade, Penn invites him over to his house. John is horrified that Penn does not have a TV and does not have many toys besides a miniature Conestoga Wagon. Eager to impress his new friend, Penn shows John a jar of dried mud from the Missouri River that his great-grandfather extracted from the bottom of the river 64 years ago. According to legends, Penn explains, mixing the dried mud with water gives the mud magical, medicinal properties. John next encounters the Missouri River mud when Penn gives it to Scooter after Scooter's stroke. Penn explains that the mud could help Scooter heal. John applies water to the mud and wipes it on Scooter's big toe, and Scooter is able to walk up the stairs. Overall, Spinelli's novel is straight realism, so the connection between John's application of the mud to Scooter's toe and Scooter's newfound ability to walk up the stairs gives the reader something to wonder. Whether the Missouri River mud has actual healing properties or not, it definitely helps heal the relationship between Penn and John.

Penn's gift is one of the sparks that makes John reconsider his relationship to Penn and start to approach Penn in a more compassionate and supportive way. John knows that Penn does not have many possessions. Furthermore, John knows how important his great-grandfather is to him. John is moved by Penn's generosity and concern for Scooter. John sees the contrast between Penn's sympathetic reaction to Scooter's stroke and Mike's callous and careless response, and this influences his decision to start defending Penn and spending more time with him.

## The Penn Relays

John first learns of the Penn Relays in the opening pages of "Crash." Penn Webb explains that he was named by his great-grandfather after the Penn Relays, an international track and field competition in Philadelphia, because his great-grandfather ran in the Penn Relays and won a race. When John reads Penn's important person essay towards the close of the book, it suddenly makes sense why Penn has been running around the neighborhood each night: Penn wants to race in the Penn Relays and make his great-grandfather proud while he is still alive to see him race. John's decision to join track and field and enter in the race seems at first to be yet another victory he intends to win. Yet ultimately John backs off and lets Penn win. It is no accident that Spinelli chose to have Penn be the last leg in the relay team that goes to the Penn Relays and to have him be the one who takes Springfield's team from last to first place. This demonstrates how Penn moves from social outcast and loser to eventual best friend for John. Moreover Penn's performance proves that he has hidden talents and athletic ability, and that he does not have to be physically bulky or strong to be a successful athlete. The Penn Relays give Penn Webb an opportunity to win a competition without confrontation, aggression, or violence. Penn succeeds on an individual level and on a team level without breaking the code of nonviolence and pacifism that he maintains unlike in football or contact sports. Finally, the Penn Relays



give Penn a chance to impress his great-grandfather and earn his name. It shows John that a name can determine your fate, if you want it to.

## Secondhand Clothing

At the beginning of the novel, Mike and John discover that Penn is wearing clothing from Second Time Around, the local thrift store. Mike and John see this as outrageous because they would sooner come to school in their underwear than in what John calls "Used Clothes." Meanwhile, since she is friends with Penn Abby has adopted some of his causes, including a philosophy of conservation and thriftiness. Abby asks her mother to buy her clothes from Second Time Around, and she agrees. Abby proudly proclaims on TV at the mall protest that her mother gets her clothes at Second Time Around, but her mother later enlightens Abby and admits this is not true. The great irony comes when John discovers he bought the red shoes for Scooter at Second Time Around because he was in such a hurry that he did not notice what store he had entered. When John's mother points this out to him, John is speechless. This makes an impression on John, who by the end of the novel accepts that his family will have to live a more frugal lifestyle now that his mother has reduced some of her hours at work. John agrees as long as his mother does not buy him underwear from Second Time Around.

In "Crash" secondhand clothing serves to illustrate the sincerity of Abby and John's feelings towards saving money and conservation. In the opening pages of "Crash" John tries to insult the Webbs by accusing them of being poor because they have a small house that does not demonstrate wealth. John is uncomfortable there partly because he has a prejudice against those who live in modesty and simplicity. When Penn comes to school wearing clothes from Second Time Around it shows yet another way that he is different from his peers, something that Mike seizes and uses as an opportunity to tease Penn. On the other hand, Abby is rigid in her beliefs in conservation and thriftiness because she emulates Penn. She is furious with her mother for lying to her because it makes Abby look dishonest and it goes against her belief system. At first it seems that Abby is just following whatever Penn tells her to do, but as the novel progresses Spinelli shows Abby to be consistent in her views, passions, and morals. In contrast, John's attitude towards thrift store clothes changes as he realizes he will have to make sacrifices now that his family's economic situation has changed. Buying secondhand clothing serves as an example of how John has matured over the course of the book.

## The Mouse

John, Mike, and Abby discover that there is a mouse in the Coogan household early in the novel, but they cannot find the actual mouse to get rid of it. To his horror, and to Abby's great amusement, John exhibits discomfort, distress, and even fear at the idea of the mouse. John's voice is strained, he stands on the table to get away from the mouse, and he exaggerates the mouse into being a big rat. Delighted with her brother's reaction, Abby sneers and exclaims, "My big brave brother, Crrrash Coogan, is afraid of mice." Eventually the family discovers that the mouse has been living in Crash's football



bag, along with tissues, dirty clothes, and smelly socks. The mouse takes off and lives in the backyard, at first in the woodpiles that are part of Abby's wildlife habitat project and then later in Abby's old dollhouse, which has been converted into the "Mouse House."

Although John denies Abby's accusation, his actions prove otherwise. John's phobia of mice proves that John is not the tough, fearless, conflict-loving Crash Coogan everyone thinks him to be. The mouse shows the irony behind John's character. Throughout the course of the novel the reader never sees John act intimidated by a peer because John is larger, faster, and stronger than his classmates. He never meets his match--until he meets the mouse, a creature he dwarfs and could easily crush or kill with his bare hands. This is one of the ways the reader sees that John's true character does not always align with the Crash Man persona people assign to him.

What adds to John's unease is that the mouse has been living in his football gear bag. In other words, he has been giving shelter to an animal that he finds intimidating, unclean, and unpleasant. He has made its existence possible and its life sustainable. This represents a turning point for John. Soon John finds himself preoccupied with the mouse when it sprints out to live in the backyard. John is concerned for its survival, and he casually gives recommendations to Abby about how she can encourage the mouse to live in her dollhouse. John's journey from fearing the mouse to supporting it mirrors his overall transformation from someone who has destructive aggression into someone who adopts a more peaceful, compassionate, and supportive role of helping others.

## The Mall

For Mrs. Coogan the new mall represents an opportunity for new business. John seems to think that they are well off because they have a two-story house; however, his family's economic comfort comes at a cost, with both parents working full time, or, in the case of Mr. Coogan, 70 hours a week. This means John and Abby see their parents much less and rarely eat together as a complete family unit. John laments the exhaustion and apathy broadcast on his parents' faces when they are home each night. On the one hand, when Mrs. Coogan hears that the mall will offer her more work and, therefore, more income, this seems like a positive opportunity. However, Abby sees the mall as an obstacle to conservation and protests against it by speaking out on TV, wearing a "Stall the Mall" t-shirt, and crafting protest signs. Whether Abby's ultimate goal is conservation or to have her mother home more is unclear, though she does remain adamant about conservation throughout the novel.

The new mall also shows how Penn has more charisma with the opposite sex than Mike and John. Penn is able to capture Jane Forbes' attention and persuade her to help him with the anti-mall quest even to the point where both of them are kicked off the cheerleading team for missing practice and going to mall protests instead. Jane is a puzzle John has never been able to figure out, and his efforts to summon his confidence and impress her with his football statistics only serve to repel her rather than captivate her. John and Mike cannot understand how Penn has permeated Jane's unfriendly and



cold personality. Penn's recruitment of Jane to his efforts as well as the ease with which he befriends her shows that when nonviolent competition applies to females, Penn defeats even the Crash Man easily.

## Painting

John's mother used to be a painter before she went to work, and her artwork hangs throughout the house. One painting in particular catches John's eye. The portrait depicts John when he was a baby, and he is smiling. This time when John revisits the portrait he sees that someone had drawn a mustache in crayon on the glass over his face. John wipes it off. The mustache is a mystery for the book as it is never resolved who drew it on John's portrait. Regardless it represents how little the family cares about Mrs. Coogan's passion for painting. John admits that he had not looked at the portrait for a while. Presumably the same goes for the rest of his family since nobody else made an effort to wipe off the crayon mustache. Either that or everyone has such apathy for Mrs. Coogan's paintings that they do not care if one has been defaced. Scooter is the sole family member who shows any interest in Mrs. Coogan's paintings, and he points out a portrait she did of him--indeed the first portrait she ever painted--in his sailor uniform when he was younger, even unrecognizable to his grandchildren.

By the end of the novel John has started to support his mother more. Mrs. Coogan has recently reduced her hours at the real estate agency. Abby suggests she take up painting again and create updated portraits of them. In the final chapter of the novel John reveals that he used his sneaker money to buy his mother paints so she can paint portraits of her family again. This action shows one of the ways in which John has matured. Whereas in the beginning of the book he equated poverty with deprivation and missing out on life, such as with the Webbs' small, one-floor house, now John has a more nuanced understanding of budgets and money. He accepts that his family will have to buy secondhand clothing from the thrift store, and he gives up money that would have gone to buy another pair of sneakers and instead uses it to encourage his mother's passion for art and painting.

## The Hawk

On the afternoon that the seventh graders compete for a spot on the Penn Relays-bound relay team, the spectators and runners stop what they are doing to watch a hawk fly overhead. For John, the hawk represents the physical embodiment of the "gift" that Penn talks about in his essay about his great-grandfather. The hawk is a majestic messenger that John takes as a sign prompting him to let Penn win the seventh-grade spot on the Penn Relays team. The events of the novel have shown John how fragile life can be, especially for the elderly. John realizes that he and Penn each have a close relationship with an older relative, and he wants Penn's great-grandfather to be able to see him race while he is still alert and aware of his surroundings. Scooter's stroke and the aftermath taught him that life is precious.



## The Essay

In March John and his classmates are given an assignment in English to write about someone they know and talk about what that person means to them. John writes about Scooter and the good memories he has of him. John saves Penn's essay after Mike steals it. At this point in the novel, John has started to align himself more with Penn than Mike. As class goes on, John is curious to read what Penn wrote, so he reads Penn's essay. Penn's essay describes his relationship with his self-described "best friend," his great-grandfather, Henry Wilhide Webb III. Parallels between Penn and his great-grandfather and John and Scooter are clear, and reading the essay contributes to John's decision to let Penn win the space on the Penn Relay team on the day Henry Wilhide Webb III attends their race-off. The final line of Penn's essay refers to a gift that could be given to his great-grandfather. The gift would be his great-grandfather seeing him run in the Penn Relays. John absorbs this, and it helps him make his decision to let Penn beat him and earn a spot on the relay team.



# Settings

## John's House

John Coogan and his family live in Pennsylvania in the Philadelphia area. John's house is medium-to-large sized with enough rooms for his parents, John, Abby, and Scooter to have their own rooms. There is a large backyard where Abby stages a war of conservationism against her father's attempts to tame the lawn. Abby tries to turn their backyard into a nature habitat and preserve it in its natural state. John eventually joins her in her quest. The backyard is also the sight of the Thanksgiving Day football game with the whole family. John is proud of his house and is astonished at Penn's house for being so small. Yet although John's house is bigger and filled with toys to play with, a TV to watch, and a big back yard to run around in, the house is empty much of the time since John's parents work so much and are rarely home. Scooter's return presents much more stability for John. By far John's favorite place in the house is Scooter's room, and in particular his bed. For John and Abby Scooter's bed represents a place of safety and comfort. When Scooter tells them stories each night, John and Abby retreat from a world where adults are negligent and inattentive and enter instead into an environment that is much more nourishing.

## School

Although it is implied that John is popular, readers really only see him with one good friend, Mike. John may be a leader on the football team--so much so that his misbehavior is forgiven by the vice principal as long as he and Mike win games--but he is actually quite shy. John knows winning moves on the football field but is awkward around girls his age. His botched attempts to talk to Jane demonstrate his cluelessness that his physical strength and athletic ability is not a guarantee that other people will like him. Overall, John does not seem particularly engaged with school work. For the purposes of the novel, school functions more as an environment where John interacts with his peers rather than a place where he goes to learn and get good grades.

## Penn's House

Penn's house is described by John as being the size of a garage. Indeed, the Webbs' house is small compared to others in the neighborhood, especially since it is a single floor home. Not only does it stand out on the outside, inside John discovers more features that distinguish the Webbs as unconventional people. The Webbs have no TV, and John is taken aback by Penn's small toy collection. John makes the assumption that this means the Webbs are poor, but Mr. and Mrs. Webb deny this and said they are rich in other ways. Penn's house represents a challenge to John as he must evaluate his notions of wealth, economy, and whether physical size is any indication of someone's character.



## The Football Field

When John is on the football field he goes into Crash Man mode. He resists any attempts to moderate his performance and is excessive with dominating the other team to the point where it is unsportsmanlike. The football field is in some ways a second home for John as he is more comfortable there than at his house and at school. It is one location where he knows his place as a team leader and record holder. Here John exceeds everybody's expectations and seemingly fulfills his destiny to be the physical bully people expect "Crash" to be.

## The Track

Even though track is not John's primary sport, he knows he is an exceptional athlete and will succeed as a runner. John is correct in his assumption. He wins every race he enters, except of course the final one. The track is where John ultimately lets himself do something he has admitted to the reader he has never done: come in second place. John steps aside and lets Penn win the race-off that determines which seventh grader will go to the Penn Relays in the climactic scene of the novel. Therefore the track represents a new environment where John proves his restraint and maturity. It presents an opportunity to start fresh.



# Themes and Motifs

## Bullying and Conformity

Even from the time he is a young boy, John is aware of his social standing. John understands that he is expected to be tough, aggressive, and intimidating to others in a way that results in his commanding place among his peers. As he says in the first chapter, "As far as I can tell, I've always been crashing--into people, into things, you name it, with or without a helmet." John is set up for the reader as a leader who leads by physical dominance, fear, and power. John shows us that even early on he is used to scaring people and getting reactions from them when he teases them. This is why Penn both infuriates and intrigues him at the same time. Penn, in his initial encounters with John, takes everything his new friend says at face value. Nothing seems to phase him except when he loses the contests with John and it looks like John will not come over to his house for dinner. Moreover, everything about Penn seems strange and unnatural to John. From the name "Penn" to the tiny Webb house to not having a TV or many toys, Penn Webb is nothing like the kids in John's neighborhood.

When John meets Mike Deluca in sixth grade, they are in theory a dream team. John is physically stronger, taller, and bigger than Mike, but Mike refuses to back down when they lock horns in a battle of who will stop punching each other first. Both boys are football players and bond over consuming vast quantities of pizza and hanging out at John's house after school. Mike immediately zeroes in on Penn because of his appearance even though John subtly tries to deflect his attention on Penn by saying he does not bother him anymore. Yet Mike focuses on Penn anyway, at first teasing him and then bullying him with progressively more offensive and destructive actions. Mike seems to think Penn is weak because Penn seems so earnest about playing along when Mike tries to joke around with him. Both John and Mike are also deeply offended by Penn's decision to join cheerleading since this goes against their ideas of masculinity and what boys should and should not do.

John's growing awareness that he feels uncomfortable being Mike's accomplice is threaded to the gradual changes in his identity as he fights to decide who the real John Coogan is. One of the dominant themes of the novel is the distance between who John really is and who the rest of the world expects him to be, the Crash Man. For most of the book, John feels he has to conform to the Crash Man identity and all the assumptions that come with it, such as overpowering those who are weak, not being afraid of anything, and being in the upper echelons of the social stratosphere in the middle school. From the beginning readers sense that John might fit in with this identity after all, and along the way his actual personality, thoughts, and morals cause him to challenge Mike and defend Penn by rescuing his kidnapped turtle and staying out of Mike's plan to drench Penn with a water gun. Ultimately it is his capacity for immense compassion and empathy that help John break away from conforming to society's expectations that he will be the Crash Man and instead embrace the less socially acceptable parts of his character.





## Conservation and Pacifism

Penn Webb introduces John to a few concepts that completely unseat John's previously held beliefs about conflict and violence. When John tries to engage Penn in a toy pistol fight Penn refuses and says he cannot play the game because he is nonviolent. This position is part of Penn's religion, Quakerism, in which his parents also participate. Quakers are pacifists, meaning they have a philosophy of peaceful resolution to conflicts, are non-confrontational, and do not engage in violence. Penn's way of handling bullying reflects his philosophy of pacifism. Rather than confront Mike or John and stand up for himself, he just lets things happen to him. Penn does not even try to defend himself and does not indicate that their teasing bothers him.

For John, this philosophy is completely foreign to him, especially since he is used to getting through life by taking an aggressive and competitive approach to conflict or any kind of challenge. This is what society expects of him since he is the Crash Man. Although in the beginning of the book John is confounded by Penn's pacifism, by the time they reach seventh grade he is used to it. John thinks everything being a game; indeed, in the beginning of Chapter 23 he reminds himself that, "Life is football." His attitude towards conflict is to either initiate it himself or overcome any potential challenge so he is the winner. Mike seems to have a similar attitude, which is one reason why he cannot accept Penn's lack of engaging in a fight with him. The difference between John and Mike is that John does not want to fight with someone who will not fight back. Mike is much more predatory and picks on Penn because he knows he will never stand up for himself. John gets more of a thrill out of an actual contest whereas Mike would rather have the upper hand even if he did not really earn it.

Another philosophy that Penn has which irritates John at first is conservationism. Penn and John's little sister Abby get along well and spend time together, and Penn influences her decision to protest the building of a new mall, transform their backyard into a habitat, adhere to a vegetarian diet, and buy clothes secondhand. On the one hand, Abby's conservation actions are interpreted by John to be just a phase. He does not really think she is serious. Yet when Abby remains pretty rigid in her beliefs throughout the course of the book John accepts that this might be a more permanent part of her personality. John even accepts his mother's announcement that she might start buying their clothes secondhand. He also helps Abby sabotage their father's attempts to hire someone to spray pesticides in the backyard. Furthermore, John gives Abby some pointers on how she could be a better friend to the mouse who is living in her old doll house in the backyard.

## Names

Spinelli makes it clear very early on that names are a major theme of the novel. Indeed, the title of the first chapter is "My Name" and the first sentences are about John's name. Throughout "Crash" John will be continually tested as he judges how he wants to act and how he is supposed to act if he is to remain the Crash Man. John will sometimes



speak of himself in the third person as the Crash Man. As the story progresses John's behavior and words demonstrate that there is a side to him that nobody except perhaps Penn sees. Penn is introduced as the only person who does not call John "Crash." This is significant because it means Penn does not associate John with his combative alter ego. When he first meets Penn John is given an opportunity to present himself however he wants to since Penn is new and does not have any preconceived notions about him.

Penn and his relationship to his own name is a theme that acts as a foil to John's relationship to the "Crash" nickname. John is confused when Penn tells him that his name is "Penn." Named by his great-grandfather for the Penn Relays international track meet in Philadelphia, Penn seems highly unlikely to live up to his name. Even though Penn's great-grandfather who named him raced and won a race in the Penn Relays, Penn seems entirely uncompetitive, uncoordinated, and unathletic. Yet when Penn races John when they first meet he impresses John. Towards the end of the novel John notices that Penn is running around their neighborhood. In fact he is going out for track and hopes to earn a spot on the school's relay team going to the Penn Relays. In the moments before the start of the race-off that will determine which seventh grader will race in the relay John sees a hawk overhead. He interprets this to be a sign that he should resist beating Penn and instead let him have the spot on the team. John realizes that he is not really "Crash," but here Penn has the opportunity to live up to his given name, which is especially significant because Penn's great-grandfather is in attendance that day.

Spinelli also hints at the significance of names with the minor characters in the novel. For example, readers never discover John's parents first names. This is in line with how Mr. and Mrs. Coogan are presented in the narrative. John acts like he is intimidated by his father and does not seem particularly close to his mother. John's parents are secondary characters in the context of the book and in the context of John's life. Another indication that names are important are with Jane Forbes. John tries to guess her name but is unsuccessful, and his first encounter with her demonstrates how he is not as charming as he thinks he is. For Spinelli, names convey a hint to the reader about how they should perceive a character. Introductions also serve to give a character an opportunity to establish their identity beyond just their name.

## Families

One of the underlying themes in "Crash" is family, and for John family is a complicated concept. John laments how his parents spend most of their time at work and come home exhausted. Although he never outwardly confronts them for not attending his games, John still feels frustrated by their absence. This is perhaps one reason why John keeps scoring touchdowns above and beyond. John takes out his resentment on the other team and perhaps unconsciously hopes that by scoring more touchdowns he will at least have made his parents proud by setting a record. His parents are indeed proud of him when he tells them the news at the dinner table.



Yet a tension still underlies their relationship. John and Abby both miss their parents, and even though they are just kids they still recognize that their family dynamics are unusual and undesirable. For example, in Chapter 13 Abby points out that they all ate dinner together. John replies half-sarcastically, saying, "Whoopee. Just like a real family." Because John and Abby never confront their parents outright with their longings to be together more, these subtle clues seem to fall on deaf ears. Hope comes in the form of Mrs. Coogan's changing employment situation. At the end of the novel Mrs. Coogan reduces her hours to part-time, which will allow her to spend more time at home with her children and with Scooter as he tries to recover from the stroke. The reader leaves the novel with the hope that this new arrangement will give John some much needed time with his mother.

For the characters in "Crash," family is a starting place to embrace or reject your family's beliefs and values. Abby goes against her family's wishes in her Penn-influenced crusade to shut down construction of the mall. This is counterproductive to Mrs. Coogan, who would directly benefit from the mall since it would give her more real estate business. Abby also attempts to follow a vegetarian diet, and she tries to convert the backyard into a wildlife habitat. This infuriates her father. As he becomes more self-aware, John realizes he has an interest in Abby's conservation efforts and helps her subvert their father's quest to reign in the out-of-control yard.

While Abby and John reject their parents' beliefs Penn embraces his family's philosophies and religion of Quakerism. One of the reasons why John is so bothered by the Webbs is that Penn's parents are both older. He explains it is because he was a late baby. Even though he initially makes fun of Penn for this, John does not realize that he has a similar situation. John's parents might be a more conventional age for being the parents of two young children, but it is the oldest adult in John's life, Scooter, who has a greater parental influence over John. John sees that older adults can be adequate if not better parents for young children. John sees that there is another way to live life when you do not conform to society's accepted models.

## Friendship

Right from the beginning of the novel the reader sees that John is not overly friendly. Indeed he is suspicious of Penn and cannot figure out why Penn does not fight back or give him the kind of reaction he wants when he is messing around with him and giving him blatantly wrong answers to his questions. John starts their relationship from a position of deception and apprehension. Penn, on the other hand, approaches John with honesty and openness. John is so insecure because of the ways that Penn subverts his expectations that he rejects their friendship and the two do not stay friends over the years.

In contrast, Mike and John get along because of what they have in common, at least at the beginning: aggression. John is perhaps the only person Mike would allow to challenge him, and Mike is at least at first the only person John sees as his peer. Indeed even the vice-principal accepts that both boys are naturally competitive. At first, John



and Mike are united in their campaign to destroy Penn's life. John initially follows along with Mike's pranks against Penn, but as the novel progresses John begins to pull away. Over Christmas break Mike had insulted John when he took Scooter's hat and told him that he would not need it because he was "old." After that their friendship erodes quickly. Mike later calls John a "dud" for suggesting that he will get suspended for drenching Penn with water from the water gun. The breaking point is reached when Mike steals Penn's turtle. Mike engages John in a physical confrontation that almost turns violent, but never far from their relationship is the fact that John is stronger and more powerful. Mike knows there is no way he would ever win a fight against him. John realizes that he does not have to fight Mike to win. Adopting Penn's theory of nonviolence, John lets his voice and body language speak for himself.

By the end of the novel, John and Penn are friends. Their friendship grew stronger after Penn left a sympathetic note for John when Scooter was recovering from the stroke. John appreciates Penn's kindness and his sincere message. During the spring semester of school John starts to defend Penn and stand up for him more. This shows how deep an impression Penn has left on John as John unconsciously adopts some of Penn's attitudes towards nonviolence. By the end of the novel, John and Penn are so close that the final words of the novel are, "Penn Webb is my best friend." John's transformation over the course of the novel shows how John's attitudes towards friendship have changed. Earlier John felt that friendship was based more on shallow things like sharing an interest in eating pizza, playing football, and being popular. At the novel's close John sees true friendship is based on mutual support, similar core beliefs and personal philosophies, and exchanges of compassion and caring.



# Styles

## Point of View

"Crash" is narrated by John "Crash" Coogan, who is also the central character. The novel is told in first person as John offers the reader an intimate look into his transformation from the Crash Man into an identity that is more his own. By fusing the reader's experience with the events to John's voice Spinelli welcomes the reader into John's innermost desires, beliefs, and fears as he grows in age and maturity. John begins by structuring his story in relation to how others see him and then allows the combination of his actions and commentary to contribute to the readers' own judgment of his character. John shows a self-awareness of his actions and frequently gives answers to why he does the things he does or says the things he says by analyzing his own words and behavior.

Because John is just a kid, his voice reflects some of his immaturity. Even though he is looking back on this early part of his life, he still reflects confusion about his actions and words. Sometimes John admits he does not understand why acts a certain way or says certain things. Part of John's journey through "Crash" is determining who he really is apart from the Crash Man personality everyone except Penn expects him to be. The dissonance between John and his alter ego drive his perspective as he grows away from this character. His confusion at his reactions to and interactions with others permeate his voice. Fortunately John does not hold back or deceive the reader, and he is a generally reliable narrator. He welcomes the reader on his progress towards maturity and gives the reader an inside look at how he gradually becomes more self-aware and mindful of his impact on the world.

## Language and Meaning

Because John Coogan is just a young kid, the language of Crash is quite simplistic. Spinelli's novel straddles the line between falling in the middle grade age range and the young adult age range. As such, Spinelli does not use advanced language that would alienate his younger readers or overly basic language that would put off older readers. John is also prone to using a lot of slang, such as "lah-dee-dah," "popped," and "outjuked," as well as some colloquial terminology from the Philadelphia area like "hoagie." By assuming that readers understand him, John equates readers with a peer. This indicates a level of trust he has with the reader. John's use of slang and localisms are in keeping with the overall style of the novel, which is conversational, laid back, and casual. John comes across as relaxed and eager to share his story. By describing people to the reader in such a familiar way, John makes the reader feel relaxed.

John is also giving readers an inside look. The intimacy with which he narrates his story shows he wants the reader to have the accurate story. Having John's perspective and hearing him use his voice and language to describe his experiences is crucial to seeing



his maturity. If Spinelli had used a third person narration, the readers would not hear John's interior monologue and commentary. John's voice and language are crucial to understanding his character, which is especially important because one of the central themes is John's understanding of himself versus the rest of the world's view of him.

## Structure

The novel is structured into basically three time periods. "Crash" opens with a flashback to when John first met Penn on the summer before their matriculation into first grade. The novel then fast forwards to the first day of seventh grade. "Crash" follows John through the entirety of his seventh grade year. The last chapter is set in the summer after seventh grade. Most chapters are preceded by the month and date upon which the events of the chapters occur. This structure shows John's ability to organize events of recent and distant memory in his mind while he matures throughout the year. At the same time, since John is no older than a rising eighth grader at the time he is composing his narrative, the novel is limited in his perspective of events in the long term.

## Quotes

My real name is John. John Coogan. But everybody calls me Crash, even my parents.  
-- John (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote introduces John and his "Crash" persona to the reader. Spinelli chooses to focus on John's name in the opening lines because it shows how John situates his identity in relation to other people. The "Crash" nickname has determined John's actions and personality since he was a little boy. Indeed the title of the novel reflects the importance of John's nickname. John states later in the opening chapter that, "As far as I can tell, I've always been crashing--into people, into things, you name it, with or without a helmet." Most of the events of the novel take place in John's pivotal seventh grade year in which John has to rethink whether he wants to be the Crash man or instead establish a new life apart from "Crash." John's struggle to establish individuality is the central conflict of the book.

I told him the stuff I did to Webb back then. 'But I don't bother with him anymore,' I said. Mike looked out the window again. It was like watching a cat watching a squirrel. 'Well,' he said, 'that's gonna change.'  
-- John and Mike (Chapter 8 paragraph 24)

**Importance:** This quote foreshadows Mike Deluca and John's friendship. By indicating that his teasing of Penn is in the past, John is subtly trying to steer Mike's relationship with Penn away from harassment. John is trying to put distance between his past actions. However, Mike sees this as an opportunity. Comparing Mike to "a cat watching a squirrel," John describes his new friend's behavior as exactly what it will be: predatory. In Mike's face John sees a glimpse of what's to come as Mike chooses Penn to be his favorite victim. When Mike announces that "that's gonna change" he confirms John's suspicions. John's journey from willing accomplice to reluctant participant to reformed bully defines the novel's chronicle of John's coming of age.

Mike and I had started out laughing. We weren't anymore. There was no way I was going to stop. I've never been No. 2 in my life. I can't stand to lose. More than that, I just won't.  
-- John (Chapter 10 paragraph 46)

**Importance:** In this quote John illuminates the underlying tension between him and Mike. Mike is just as competitive as John. Both boys compete on the football team and love to speculate over how many tackles they will make and which players they will destroy. This aggression that fuels their athleticism translates into their relationship as each boy is energized when they challenge each other trying to see who will back down first. Here John reveals that he is not capable of losing because he will not allow it to happen. John's words also tell the reader that he has a hard time moderating his desire to be the best and to win. John's performance on the football field reinforces this personal challenge because John cannot stop scoring touchdowns.



Sometimes I wish we could turn the day upside down so that their main time at home would be in the morning, before they get all worn out. I'll tell you, at the end of a day it doesn't take much to crush a parent.

-- John (Chapter 17 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** This quote hints at the longing John feels for a more connected family. John's parents both work long hours that limit the time they can spend together. John feels resentful that he does not have more time with them in the morning, when they are more upbeat, engaged, and positive. Instead he sees them primarily at the end of the day when they are exhausted and drained of passion and enthusiasm. Because they are too worn out they cannot attend John's football games or take John to the Philadelphia Phillies baseball games. John's behavior on the football field when he scores so many touchdowns he is pulled from the game reflects an underlying tension he feels with his parents. John's lack of restraint is partly a reaction to his parents' missing his game.

I knew what was happening. We both grew up thinking Scooter's bed was the safest place in the world, like a boat in a sea full of crocs. It was a place where you could say things out loud that you might only think anywhere else.

-- John (Chapter 20 paragraph 32)

**Importance:** For John and Abby, Scooter's bed represents a place of safety, acceptance, and love. When they are on Scooter's bed listening to his stories, John and Abby are unified and overcome petty sibling rivalries. Scooter is a skilled storyteller capable of capturing John and Abby's attention and manipulating language, sounds, and events for great entertainment effect. Scooter also seems to have nearly limitless patience and energy for his grandchildren, a stark contrast to John and Abby's parents. The nightly storytelling sessions cease when Scooter has a stroke and is hospitalized. Abby and John try to recapture that by spending time in Scooter's room and later telling Scooter stories when he comes home, but it will never be the same.

On the football field I don't run around people, I run through them. Life is football. For a couple minutes there, I had forgotten.

-- John (Chapter 23 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote is part of John's internal monologue when he is at the dance. John finds himself paralyzed and inept at finding a dance partner. When he remembers his Crash man mentality, it bolsters his confidence and makes him think he can succeed at getting Jane to dance with him. Jane has always represented something of a challenge for John because she has never been swayed by his charms. True to form, John brags about his football accomplishments to Jane to try to convince her to dance with him. Jane is unimpressed and nonplussed. John's idea to apply his success playing football to the tenuous first steps at romance shows the reader--and more importantly, John, whether he accepts it or not--that John is not invincible and that not everything can be won off the field in the same way it is won on the field.





Why did I do it? I was just being me, that's all. The Crash Man.  
-- John (Chapter 30 paragraph 16)

**Importance:** At this point John expresses practically no remorse after he tackled Scooter on the family's Thanksgiving Day football scrimmage. He blames his actions on the Crash Man identity as if his reaction was expected and acceptable. John has pent-up aggression coursing through him, and he still has a hard time regulating his anger. John may sound casual when he references how he was a "little mad" at Scooter all week because he did not tape his record-breaking football game, but John's actions reflect a far greater frustration with his grandfather. Perhaps one reason why John is upset at Scooter is because Scooter's failure to tape the game means John's parents likely will not get to see him play. Also underlying John's anger is a growing anxiety that Scooter is aging. Later in the chapter John observes Scooter sleeping and describes him as, "...just about as old as anybody I ever saw. I didn't like it." When Scooter was tackled it was as if John's previous perception of Scooter as someone of limitless strength was beginning to unravel. As Scooter's physical condition declines throughout the book, John will have to negotiate an approach that is softer than his "Crash Man" persona.

Mike wasn't moving, except his tongue drilling for jelly. I jumped up and ripped the hat from his head. 'Hey!' he squawked. 'Whattaya doin'? I thought you said he was in the hospital. He don't need it. He's old.' I screamed, 'He's not old!' and charged down the hall.

-- Mike and John (Chapter 34 paragraph 24)

**Importance:** In this conversation the reader sees that John reverses his position from earlier in the book when he called Scooter "...just about as old as anybody I ever saw." This is a private fear of John's, so when Mike casually dismisses Scooter as "old" it touches a nerve in John. John secretly agrees with Mike that Scooter is old, but he remains in denial about this fact. This conversation also shows the beginning of the end of Mike and John's friendship. Mike has always been anything but inconsiderate, but John is experiencing a new sensitivity towards others' feelings and is indeed feeling a lot less emotionally secure than he was before Scooter's stroke. Usually happy to support his best friend, John instead turns on him here. John realizes that not everything is a joke, and he privately hopes that Scooter can not be dismissed so easily now that he is "old."

Crash Coogan. The Crash Man. Suddenly the name didn't seem to fit exactly. I had always thought my name and me were the same thing. Now there was a crack of daylight between them, like my shell was coming loose. It was scary.

-- John (Chapter 36 paragraph 26)

**Importance:** Here John reflects on the growing dissonance between the Crash Man that everyone thinks him to be and the more restrained, non-confrontational, and considerate of others. Furthermore, John is slowly becoming more of a pacifist as he chooses to abstain from helping Mike drench Penn with the water gun. John shows that he also understands the consequences of going too far; he tells Mike that Mike will get



suspended if he soaks Penn with the water gun. In response to Mike's calling him a "dud" John challenges him back by physically intimidating him. While John and Mike normally try to top each other like this, now there is no underlying friendliness about it. John uses his physical presence to get Mike to take back his words, but John understands that something has irrevocably changed between them and indeed between John and the Crash Man.

A-bye.

-- Scooter (Chapter 37 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** After Scooter's stroke and rehabilitation, the only thing he can say is, "A-bye." This is a medical condition known as aphasia and is not uncommon for stroke victims. Scooter's loss of his ability to speak seems at first like it will forever change his relationship to his family. In particular, Scooter was known for his way with words. He used navy and seafaring lingo with Abby and John. More significant, Scooter was a skilled storyteller who captivated his grandchildren with his narrative prowess. Now that Scooter is forever changed, Abby and John have to adjust their expectations of their grandfather. On the one hand, if Scooter's condition never improves, he will not be able to tell them another story. On the other hand, this presents an opportunity for his grandchildren to craft stories of their own. Scooter's limited language skills force Abby and John to rethink the way they communicate with someone they love.

I'm trying to get back the old safe-in-the-bed boat feeling. I can't quite make it. Before, it was like Scooter was captain and we were the mates. Now it's turned around. We're the captains. You don't feel so safe being captain.

-- John (Chapter 44 paragraph 20)

**Importance:** In this quote John reveals how he is starting to understand that he will never recapture the same sense of comfort and innocence that he had when he and Abby would listen to Scooter's stories in Scooter's beds. John recognizes that his life will never be the same as it was when Scooter was healthy before the stroke. Understanding that roles have been reversed, John shows a self-awareness that as he grows older, so do the adults in his life. John realizes that perhaps being a leader is not as safe and secure as he thought it would be. As the novel nears its conclusion John is asked to grow up and accept realities his family faces. For example, John grudgingly agrees to wear clothing from the thrift store after his mom says she might shop there now that she has left her job. Scooter's physical demise awakens a new era in John's life in which he matures into a young adult.

A single hawk, its wingtips spread like black fingers, kited over the school, and suddenly I saw something: a gift. A gift for a great-grandfather from North Dakota, maybe for all great-grandfathers. But the thing was, only one person could give the gift, and it wasn't the great-grandson, not on his fastest day alive. It was me.

-- John (Chapter 46 paragraph 13)

**Importance:** John's interpretation of the hawk demonstrates his transformation over the course of the book. One possible interpretation of the "gift" is that John considers victory



in the race-off to be the gift. John has continually shown over the book that he is aware of his own physical strengths. He has already admitted that he does not like to lose and will not let himself lose a competition. Yet here John sees that by allowing Penn to get the spot on the Penn Relays team John would win more by losing than by winning. John knows it is Penn's time to achieve something, especially as it relates to the inherited running talent from his great-grandfather. Moreover, John realizes that he will allow Penn to fulfill the destiny prescribed to him with the name "Penn" if he helps him win a spot on the relay team. At this point in the novel John realizes that he might no longer fit with the Crash nickname, but Penn has a shot at realizing his parents' dreams when they named him "Penn." It has taken the course of the novel, but John has learned that he can be supportive and considerate in competitions. He does not have to crash into everything in order to feel good.