

The Crossover Study Guide

The Crossover by Kwame Alexander

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Plot Summary

“The Crossover” is a young adult novel by Kwame Alexander that follows the life experiences of 12-year-old basketball player Josh Bell across several months in the autumn and early winter of his seventh-grade year at Reggie Lewis Middle School. Josh is the identical twin brother of Jordan “JB” Bell, the son of Crystal Bell, the assistant principal, and the son of Chuck Bell, a former basketball superstar who is well-known and well-respected even years after his career ended. Josh and JB both love basketball, but it is Josh who truly admires and wishes to emulate his father by following in his father’s footsteps. For Josh, basketball is not merely about fame at school, or future fortune, but because he truly does have a love – a deep and abiding passion – for the game itself. He loves his family dearly, and loves the way life is going for him.

Things begin to change soon for Josh, however. JB gets a girlfriend, and begins spending less and less time with Josh and Chuck. Josh begins to feel lonely, and jealous of JB, leading to anger on the part of Josh. After a failed bet with JB leads to JB accidentally cutting off five of Josh’s dreadlocks, Josh must have his head shaved, and his anger toward JB only increases. At the same time, Chuck’s health takes a precipitous decline, as his lifetime of poor eating habits combined with a genetic predisposition to heart conditions finally catches up to him, causing him to experience numerous symptoms from nosebleeds to coughing fits to mild heart attacks. Josh’s anger spills over during a basketball game when he intentionally throws a hard pass at JB’s face, striking him squarely on the nose, and nearly causing a break. As a result, the relationship between the brothers is nearly broken as well, leading to JB giving Josh the cold shoulder for much of the novel.

Ultimately, Chuck has a major heart attack, and is admitted to the hospital. Josh realizes that his father’s superstar feeling of invincibility, his young age of 39, his horrible eating habits, and his distrust of doctors, have all led to Chuck’s heart attack. Over the next few weeks, Chuck suffers two more major heart attacks, the second of which ultimately kills him. Chuck’s death seems to suck all the light out of Josh’s life, but Josh comes to understand that he still has his brother, JB. JB feels the same way, and as such, both brothers renew their relationship. Josh comes to understand that JB will symbolically take his father’s place, and aside from their mother, the brothers realize that all they have are each other.



Warm Up – First Quarter

Summary

Warm Up

Dribbling – The novel begins with a poem about playing basketball, in which the narrator brags about his skills and talent.

Josh Bell – The narrator’s name is Josh Bell. He is tall, has long hair, loves basketball, and goes by the nickname “Filthy McNasty”. Josh’s father also has a history with basketball, but Josh believes his father is too old-school compared to the work Josh does now.

How I Got My Nickname – Josh’s father loves the musician Horace Silver, but Josh thinks his music is only okay. Josh’s father attempts to get Josh to understand just how good Silver is while listening to his Paris Blues album, and dedicates the next song –“Filthy McNasty” – to Josh.

At First – Josh doesn’t like his nickname at first because so many people make fun of it. As he gets older, and plays basketball, the name takes on new meaning, denoting his skill and talent.

Filthy McNasty – Filthy McNasty becomes Josh’s identity, and is synonymous with his basketball talents.

Jordan Bell – Jordan Bell, or JB, is Josh’s twin brother who also loves basketball, and loves to bet. JB is obsessed with Michael Jordan, owning everything from Air Jordan shoes to Michael Jordan pillowcases, posters, and sunglasses. JB uses fifty bucks won from a bet with his dad on whether or not the Krispy Kreme Hot sign would be on to buy a Michael Jordan toothbrush on eBay.

On The Way to the Game – Heading to the game, Josh is in the backseat where JB messes with Josh’s hair locks until Josh hits JB’s bald head with his jockstrap.

Five Reasons I Have Locks – There are five reasons Josh has long hair. Some of his favorite rappers, including Lil Wayne, have them; he feels like a king with them; no one else on the team has them; it helps distinguish him from his twin, JB; and mostly because his father used to have them when he played ball. Josh watches an ESPN clip of his father slam-dunking over a seven-foot Croatian center in which his father’s locks look like wings, and make it look like he is flying. Josh wants that same effect.

Mom Tells Dad – Josh’s mother tells his father that he has to sit at the top back of the bleachers because he is too confrontational. Josh’s father tells Josh to remember to follow through on his jump shot. JB tells their mother no hugs before the game, because they are almost in high school now. Their father tells them to value their mother’s love.



Josh and JB worry about the fact that their mother comes to all their games, and is the assistant principal at school.

Conversation – Josh asks his father, Chuck, if he ever misses playing basketball. His father does, but says his days of playing are over in favor of caring for his family. He is considering finding work, but his careful saving from his basketball days means he doesn't have to work. Josh asks why his father never wears his championship ring, and asks if he can wear the ring to school. Josh's father says if Josh brings home a trophy this year, then it will be considered. Josh suggests his father write a book with all the rules he gives Josh and JB in it. Chuck finds this amusing. He says that back in the day, he had the sickest double cross, and he kissed so many pretty ladies, he was called "Lip-Gloss".

Basketball Rule #1 – In life, family is the court, and the ball is one's heart. The heart should always be left on the court.

First Quarter

JB and I – Josh lists the differences between himself and JB. They are both almost thirteen, but Josh is an inch taller and has dreadlocks, while JB shaves his head once a month. Josh wants to go to Duke; JB wants to go to Carolina. Josh plays forward; JB is a shooting guard. Josh is the better slasher; JB is the better humper. Josh is faster. They both, however, pass well, especially to each other. To get ready for basketball season, Josh goes to three camps; JB only goes to one because he doesn't want to miss Bible school, for ever since Kim Bazemore kissed JB in Sunday school, JB has been acting more and more religious, thinks more and more about girls, and less and less about basketball.

At the End of the Warm-Ups, My Brother Tries to Dunk – Josh shows up his brother during warmups by dunking, after JB tries to dunk and fails. Josh and JB's best friend, Vondie Little, laughs as the coach impersonates Phil Jackson. The game then begins.

The Sportscaster – When playing, JB likes to trash talk like their Dad used to do during games. Josh prefers to remain silent, talking to himself in his mind.

Josh's Play-by-Play – Josh narrates the game in his mind, from Reggie Lewis Junior High's Wildcats' defeat of Hoover Middle last week, to their present game tonight. JB and Josh do incredibly well in the game as it unfolds.

Cross-o-ver – A crossover is a simple basketball move wherein a player quickly dribbles the ball from one hand to the other. It is a devastating move in the hands of someone like Allen Iverson. Josh can also do it well, having been taught by his dad.

The Show – Josh continues to play in the game, and serves to Vondie under the hoop.

The Bet, Part One – The Wildcats are down by seven at halftime. The Coach says not to worry, that the team is merely not inspired. Vondie begins dancing the Snake, and



then the whole team joins in. JB tells Josh he wants to make a bet, and touches Josh's hair.

Ode to My Hair – Josh loves his hair and will not risk it on a bet.

The Bet, Part Two – JB says if the score is tied, and he gets the ball and doesn't miss the last shot, he gets to cut Josh's hair off. Josh counters by saying that if he wins the bet, JB has to walk around at lunch without pants and underwear on. The bet is revised. If Josh loses, JB will cut one of his locks off. If JB loses, he will moon the nerdy sixth graders at lunch. Josh takes the bet.

The Game is Tied – JB wins the bet, and Josh is stunned.

In the Locker Room – After the game, JB is thrilled. With red scissors borrowed from Coach's desk, JB approaches Josh.

Cut – JB cuts, and then Josh hears Vondie yell "Oh, snap!"

Calamity – JB, goofing around, has accidentally cut off five, rather than one of Josh's dreads. He now has a bald spot on the side of his head. Josh's parents are stunned as well, and on Saturday, Josh will have to have the rest cut off.

Mom Doesn't Like Us Eating Out – Once a month, Josh and his family eat out. They go to the Golden Dragon buffet for Chinese food. There, Josh's mother insists that JB apologizes, which he halfheartedly does. Josh's mom won't let the family eat at Pollard's Chicken and BBQ anymore, even though it is Chuck's favorite. She is obviously worried about Chuck's health. JB grabs three packets of duck sauce, and a bowl of wonton soup for Josh, which is exactly what Josh wanted, though he never said it out loud.

Missing – Josh is heartbroken over the loss of his hair.

The Inside of Mom and Dad's Bedroom Closet – Josh and JB often sneak into their parents' closet to look at their dad's old basketball stuff. Josh asks his mother for a box from the closet to put his dreadlocks in. JB apologizes for what has happened in earnest, promising to cut the grass for the rest of the year, tend to the leaves in the fall, and even wash his hair – which gets Josh to give JB a noogie, and both brothers to laugh. Both brothers then rummage through their father's old newspaper clippings, when he was known as Chuck "Da Man" Bell. They find his championship ring, and JB tries it on. They then discover an envelope marked "Private", in which there is a letter from the Los Angeles Lakers, invited Chuck to free-agent tryouts, and a letter noting that Chuck's decision not to have surgery on his patella tendonitis may mean he may not be able to play again.

Pa-tel-la Ten-di-ni-tis – Patella tendonitis is a condition where the muscle that attaches the kneecap to the shin becomes irritated due to overuse. It is known popularly as "Jumper's Knee". They realize their dad went from Euroleague Champion and million-dollar fadeaway jumper to a star shoe career faded away. Josh wonders why Chuck never had the surgery.



Sundays After Church – After church on Sundays, a pick-up game occurs at the county recreational center. In these games, Chuck plays with his sons.

Basketball Rule #2 – Josh transcribes a variety of his father’s rules, from “aim shoot” to “Play hard, Practice harder”.

Girls – The school is stunned on Monday to see Josh without his dreads. At lunch, a beautiful new girl in tight jeans and pink Reeboks comes up to the table where Josh and JB are sitting. JB notices her immediately. She asks if it is true that Josh and JB always know what the other is thinking. Josh tells her that she doesn’t have to be a twin to know what JB is thinking.

While Vondie and JB – JB and Vondie discuss the new girl’s looks while Josh does his brother’s English homework. Josh does not mind it, for he loves English class. When they ask Josh what he thinks of the new girl, he tells them she is pulchritudinous.

Pul-chri-tu-di-nous – Pulchritudinous means to have great physical beauty and appeal. The new girl seems to be interested in JB.

Practice – During practice, Coach reads to his players from “The Art of War”, about winning strategies requiring quick responses to changing conditions.

Walking Home – Heading home from practice with JB, Josh wonders about why their father never had surgery, and why their father can’t eat foods with too much salt. Josh proposes that he and JB play to twenty-one when they get home. JB agrees if Josh is willing to bet ten bucks on it.

Man to Man – Josh and JB play twenty-one at home. Before they can finish, Josh is yelled at by his mom to clean his room.

After Dinner – After dinner, Chuck brings Josh and JB to the rec center to practice shooting free throws, with the purpose being to get his sons to stay focused despite distractions. Three local players recognize Chuck and ask for autographs. They decide to play three-on-three, with the loser paying twenty bucks at JB’s insistence.

After We Win – Chuck and his sons win the scrimmage. Afterwards, Josh and JB see the new girl shooting hoops on a nearby court. JB goes over to watch her. Josh can tell JB likes her.

Dad Takes Us to Krispy Kreme and Tells Us His Favorite Story (Again) – After the rec center, Chuck, Josh, and JB get doughnuts. Though Chuck is not supposed to be eating any more doughnuts, he says what his wife doesn’t know won’t hurt her. He congratulates them on their eleven-nothing three-on-three game, and says that they didn’t take money from the college kids because they were just kids, really. Chuck reminds his kids that, from the time they were two, he was teaching them the game. The boys’ mother thought he was crazy, and he was – crazy in love with his twin boys. They were shooting free throws by the age of three, on the model of Beethoven, who could



write music while he was deaf. The boys shooting hoops while so young was musical to Chuck.

Basketball Rule #3 – One should never lower one's goals, or allow someone to lower those goals for them. Expectations of people are determined by their limitations in life. The sky should always be the limit.

Josh's Play-by-Play – The Wildcats take on the defending county champions, the Red Rockets. The game shifts back and forth. Josh does especially well, and wishes he was in college so he could see a replay of his stealing ball midair to dunk it.

The New Girl – The new girl tells Josh he did well in the game, and asks if he and JB are coming to the gym over Thanksgiving break. She asks why he cut his locks, thinking they were kind of cute. JB approaches, and the new girl hands JB some sweet tea, which she brought for him.

I Missed Three Free Throws Tonight – Each night after dinner, Chuck makes his sons shoot free throws until they make ten in a row. Because Josh missed three during the game, he must now make fifteen.

Basketball Rule #4 – If enough of life's free throws are missed, one will pay in the end.

Having a Mother – Josh and JB's mother always makes them read at night before bed. JB listens to his iPod at the same time, which Josh doesn't understand how he can do. He doesn't hear Josh when Josh asks him if the new girl is his girlfriend, and doesn't hear their parents begin to argue.

Mom Shouts – Josh's mother tells his father to get a checkup, because hypertension is genetic. Josh's father has apparently passed out. He says the only doctor he needs is his wife, Dr. Crystal Bell. Josh then knows what happens, and it grosses him out.

Hy-per-ten-sion – Hypertension is commonly known as high blood pressure. This is why Crystal limits her husband's salt intake. Hypertension runs in families, and Josh believes his father's father died of hypertension.

To Fall Asleep – Josh counts strands of hair in the box beneath his bed to fall asleep.

Why We Only Ate Salad for Thanksgiving – Every year, Grandma makes dinner, but having fallen from the stoop, Crystal's younger brother, Josh and JB's Uncle Bob, decides to make dinner. It is horrible. The ham, for example, looks green, prompting Crystal to ask if there are any green eggs to go with it, causing Grandma to laugh so hard she falls out of her wheelchair.

How Do You Spell Trouble? – While Josh passes a note from JB to the new girl, whom he has come to call Miss Sweet Tea, during class during a test, the teacher catches him.



Bad News – Josh is sent to his mother. She tells him cheating is not tolerated. Rather than betray his brother or Miss Sweet Tea, Josh takes the heat.

Gym Class – In gym class, Mr. Lane has the students practice CPR. Everyone laughs as Josh demonstrates on a dummy.

Analysis

“The Crossover” is a young adult novel by Kwame Alexander which follows the life experiences of 12-year-old basketball player Josh Bell across several months in the autumn and early winter of his seventh-grade year at Reggie Lewis Middle School. As the novel opens, the reader meets the members of the Bell family: former basketball superstar and father, Chuck; assistant principal and mother, Crystal; and twin sons, Josh and JB. While the brothers share many things in common, such as a love of basketball, there are things which set them apart as well, such as Josh’s dreadlocks. The dreadlocks are more than a mere hairstyle to Josh, for they are grown in emulation of his father – Josh’s hero – and are grown because they remind Josh of wings. Josh feels freest and most himself when he is playing basketball, giving rise to the theme of flight which will appear at various points throughout the novel.

At the same time that flight becomes thematic to the novel, so too does the theme of coming of age. Josh, who is very happy with the way his life is – between his stable family, his relationship with his brother, his fame on the team and at school, and his father being his role model – is about to have the relatively insulated world in which he has lived torn apart. In the first two parts of the novel, warning signs begin appearing all over the place. JB has clearly fallen for Miss Sweet Tea (whose real name will later be revealed to be Alexis, but will be referred to be her name here, simply for the sake of simplicity), and this is beginning to affect JB in ways that Josh finds noticeable. For example, whenever JB is talking to Alexis, JB pays little attention to anything else going on, and sometimes doesn’t even realize that Josh is talking to him. This is in stark contrast to the bond that both brothers share, a bond that is so close that Alexis asks if it is true if the two brothers really can read one another’s minds.

This close bond between the brothers is also indicative of the closeness of the Bell family, giving rise a strong theme of family that will serve as a backdrop to the entire novel, the way that Chuck forms the center of Josh’s world. The reader should note that the nature of Josh and JB as twins isn’t accidental, but symbolic of the fact that they are as close as they are both literally, and figuratively. No two siblings can be more similar or closer than twins biologically, and figuratively, no two siblings in the novel (or friends, for that matter) are closer than Josh and JB. The brothers watch out for one another and help one another (Josh, for example, helps JB out with his homework on a regular basis, even doing it for him sometimes), and even during basketball games, the brothers look to pass to one another first. When it comes to basketball, their love of the game doesn’t have to do purely with the game itself, but because of the love their father has for the game, and the love that their father gave them for the game. That instillation



of love for the game is itself a gift and an aspect of basketball that Josh and JB love, in addition to loving the game itself – made possible by family.

Discussion Question 1

Josh and JB are identical twins. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? How do these similarities and differences affect their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

What is wrong with Chuck's health? Why does it worry Crystal and Josh?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Josh's dreadlocks matter so much to him? Why has he grown them in the first place?

Vocabulary

greatness, hippest, mythical, dubious, agitating, banished, podiatry, calamity, seldom, pulchritudinous, frantically, camaraderie, imbecile



Second Quarter

Summary

Conversation – Josh tells JB about playing ball at the rec center with older guys, and how well he did. JB barely pays attention, chatting with Miss Sweet Tea on the computer.

Conversation – Josh asks his father about JB's spacey behavior. Chuck just laughs about it, saying trying to talk to JB right now would be like trying to push water uphill with a rake. He says they should go get doughnuts.

Basketball Rule # 5 – When one stops playing the game, one has already lost.

Showoff – Josh loves playing basketball, and loves making moves.

Out of Control – Because Josh's mom misses the game, Chuck sits front and center and goes crazy on the referee all night.

Mom Calls Me Into the Kitchen – At home, Crystal speaks to Josh about how his grandfather died of heart disease after a stroke following years of bad eating and not taking care of himself. Crystal has decided to change the eating habits of the family, beginning with pita chips and hummus for dinner. Places like the Golden Dragon, Pollards, and Krispy Kreme are now off-limits.

35-18 – The Wildcats have another victory in game six. Josh and JB are interviewed by a reporter, who asks them how they got so good. Chuck screams that it is all his doing, getting everyone to laugh. On the way home, Chuck suggests stopping at Pollard's, but Josh says no, saying he has to do homework and is not hungry, even though he skipped lunch and did his homework at halftime.

Too Good – Josh worries that everything in his life has been going too good lately. He thinks about what Coach says, about not getting used to things going well, because something can always go wrong.

I'm on Free Throw Number Twenty-Seven – While shooting hoops, Chuck doubles over in pain on the ground, clutching his chest and coughing. Josh thinks that Chuck might be overheated, so Josh runs into the house to get a cold cloth, and when he returns outside, Chuck is laughing and spraying JB with a hose. He sprays Josh, too. Both sons laugh, but Josh is not laughing on the inside.

He Probably – JB thinks that Chuck got something stuck in his throat. They want to tell their mom what has happened, but cannot do so. The phone rings, and suddenly shy, JB cannot talk to the caller, Miss Sweet Tea.



I-ron-ic – Irony includes a curious or humorous unexpected sequence of events marked by coincidence. Irony is Vondie hating astronomy when his mother works for NASA. JB, so full of swagger, cannot talk to Miss Sweet Tea, so he hands Josh the phone.

This is Alexis – May I Please Speak to Jordan? – Sometimes, identical twins look alike, and sometimes sound alike.

Phone Conversation (I Sub for JB) – Josh pretends to be JB on the phone with Alexis, calling her the prettiest of all her sisters. She asks if the family is rich, and Josh says they have money, but they're not wealthy. She wants to be introduced to Chuck. She also asks if she is JB's girlfriend. Josh looks at JB for confirmation, which is given, and then Josh confirms it to Alexis. She says she likes JB a lot, and calls him "precious". Josh almost accidentally calls her "Miss Sweet Tea" and then covers by calling her "my sweetness".

JB and I – Josh always eats lunch with JB and Vondie, but Vondie is sick, and JB is late to the cafeteria, walking in holding Miss Sweet Tea's hand.

Boy Walks into a Room – JB and Alexis walk over to Josh, and JB says hello to Filthy McNasty. This causes Alexis and JB to snicker as though it is some mean inside joke about Josh's name.

At Practice – Coach has the team work on mental focus using meditation. Josh gets a vision of JB in a hospital in his mind, and so he opens his eyes to look at Josh, who looks like he has just seen a ghost.

Second-Person – Josh feels lonely walking home alone without JB, and realizes he is jealous of JB's girlfriend.

Third Wheel – Josh goes to the library for a copy of "The Giver" to do a book report. He passes an old man reading "The Tipping Point". In the teen fiction section, he finds Alexis kissing JB.

Tip-ping Point – A tipping point is when an object shifts from one position into an entirely different one. A potential tipping point would be Crystal no longer letting Josh play basketball if he ends up with Cs on his report card. Josh's tipping point is seeing JB and Alexis kissing.

The Main Reason I Can't Sleep – As Josh goes to sleep, he listens to JB on the phone with Alexis, and Josh wishes he had his own girl to talk to.

Surprised – While walking to the game, Josh plans to talk to JB about he's spending more time with Alexis than him or Chuck, but JB catches a ride with Miss Sweet Tea instead.

Conversation – Josh asks his father if afraid of the hospital. Chuck says he doesn't trust doctors, that his father died at 45 after consulting a doctor. Crystal says Chuck's father was really sick. Josh tells his father that just because a teammate gets fouled up on a



lay-up, doesn't mean he shouldn't ever drive to the lane again. This causes Chuck to laugh.

Game Time: 6:00 PM – A police officer pulls Chuck over for a broken taillight. Chuck does not have his license with him. After verifying Chuck's identity on Google on his phone, the cop is thrilled to meet Chuck, asks for an autograph, and only issues a warning for the taillight. Josh, however, gets to the game one minute late.

This is My Second Year – The Coach won't listen to why Josh is late. Coach benches Josh, instead.

Basketball Rule # 6 – A good scorer with a teammate on point and ready to assist makes a great team.

Josh's Play-by-Play – Josh is allowed to play beginning with the second half. As he plays, he remembers his locks are gone, and feels as if he can no longer truly fly, as if he is not the same person. He sees JB is open for the ball.

Before – Throughout the game, Josh sees how much attention his brother is getting from the crowd, is jealous of his brother's relationship with Miss Sweet Tea, is still angry at being benched for the first half, and when he hears JB screaming for a pass while open, Josh throws a hard pass. The ball hits JB in the face, knocking him down, and giving him a bloody nose.

Analysis

As the novel continues, things begin to deteriorate rapidly for Josh. Everything he has known and enjoyed is now being challenged, leading to heartbreaking and terrifying places as the theme of coming of age is expanded. JB's relationship with Alexis begins in earnest, bringing JB further and further away from Josh in the process. JB begins to spend more and more of his time with Alexis, meaning he spends less time with Josh and Chuck. Josh begins to resent this, for his bond with his brother has been such that they have been incredibly close, doing everything from even walking to school together, and walking home from games together. Now, Josh feels more and more lonely as JB continues to do his own thing.

While Josh does not come out and say it, it is apparent to the reader that his anger comes in large part as a response not only to change in general, but to specific changes in his life. His anger also coincides with the return of the theme of flight – which, interestingly enough, has not appeared in presence, but in absence. With everything seemingly going wrong, Josh no longer feels as if he is free and flying while playing basketball. Indeed, between his cut locks and his being banned from basketball altogether, flight no longer seems possible at all. (The absence of locks is the absence of wings is the absence of flight.) Josh is weighed down with the worries of the world, rather than made weightless through doing what he loves to do.



Discussion Question 1

How does Josh and JB's relationship as brothers deteriorate after the hospital visit following the basketball game? How does Josh try to make things right? How does JB respond? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Josh feel as if he can no longer fly without his locks? Do you think he is overreacting? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

For what reasons does Josh slam JB in the face with a basketball? Why is this such a heinous thing for Josh to do?

Vocabulary

struts, stutters, ironic, speechless, opulent, reputation, verdict, volcanic, solemn



Third Quarter

Summary

After – On the way home from the hospital, no one speaks. Josh feels miles away from his family.

Suspension – Josh's mom asks him what has gotten into him the past few weeks. She wants to know if it is because JB has a girlfriend. Josh explains that he was just a little angry, and is sorry. Crystal tells Josh that he must apologize to JB, and that Josh is suspended from the team.

Chur-lish – Churlish means to have a bad temper and being difficult to work with. Josh wonders how to go about apologizing to his brother for almost breaking his nose.

This Week, I – A week passes. Josh watches the team win game nine, makes honor roll, eats lunch alone, walks home by himself, and apologizes to JB, though JB does not want to hear it.

Basketball Rule #7 – Rebounding is always being prepared and anticipatory, and not dropping the ball.

The Nosebleed Section – Josh and his parents watch the next game from the top back section of the bleachers. Josh tells his father that JB won't talk to him. Chuck says Josh just has to let the smoke clear, and to write JB a letter in the meantime.

Fast Break – JB tries to slam dunk during the game but is elbowed and fouled instead.

Storm – The foul sends Chuck down to the floor to get in the ref's face. Coach and Crystal have to bring Chuck away from the ref. It is then that Crystal hands Chuck a tissue, for Chuck has a nosebleed. She then pulls out a second tissue to wipe away her own tears.

The Next Morning – Crystal tells Chuck to set up an appointment with Dr. Youngblood. She also tells JB that Josh has apologized profusely for his mistake, and JB says it wasn't a mistake.

Pro-fuse-ly – Profusely means to pour forth in great quantity. Josh has apologized to JB profusely; the team thanks JB profusely for leading them into the playoffs; and Chuck's blood pressure got so high during the game it caused a profuse nosebleed.

Article #1 in the Daily News (December 14) – An article in the paper credits JB with leading the Wildcats to the playoffs. The paper also selects Josh as Junior High MVP.

Mostly Everyone – Everyone at school congratulates Josh on MVP, except Alexis, who says what he did to JB was mean and that Josh is a jerk.



Final Jeopardy – Josh pleads to his mother to let him play ball again. She tells him his behavior going forward is what matters. Crystal then tells JB to invite Alexis over for dinner. JB says he'll think about it.

Dear Jordan – Josh writes an apology letter to JB, saying without JB, he feels empty, and his life feels broken because of what has happened.

I Don't Know – Josh isn't sure if JB reads his letter, but when he cracks a joke at Vondie's forehead, he can feel JB laughing.

No Pizza and Fries – Josh is forced to eat spinach and tofu salad for lunch. Alexis shoots Josh a dirty look.

Even Vondie – Vondie now has a girlfriend, who is a cheerleader and candy striper with thin legs and a big butt. Josh feels very lonely because he does not have a girlfriend himself.

Uh Oh – Josh hears panting coming from his parents' room.

I Run into Dad's Room – Chuck is cleaning the floor, having just thrown up. He says it must have been something he ate. He also clutches his chest in the process. He reveals he has received an offer to coach college ball beginning next month. He longs to be back on the court. Josh worries about his dad's health, and asks his dad not to call him "Filthy" anymore. Josh asks about playing ball again, and Chuck tells his son he has let more than just his team down, but his family down as well. Crystal appears and tells Josh to set the table. Her eyes are panicked looking at Chuck, who is still holding his chest.

Behind Closed Doors – Chuck and Crystal argue about Chuck returning to the court. She says it is too much stress on him. The argument gives way to passion, which causes Josh to cringe in the kitchen.

The Girl Who Stole My Brother – Josh decides to stop calling Alexis "Miss Sweet Tea" and start calling her "The Girl Who Stole My Brother" instead. She attends dinner. Crystal asks how JB and Alexis met, during which time JB recounts Alexis's first day, saying he called her "pulchritudinous". JB casts a quick look at Josh, and Josh sees a hint of a smile.

Things I Learn at Dinner – Alexis's parents are divorced, she went to Nike Hoops Camp for Girls, and her sister goes to Duke.

Dishes – While cleaning up from dinner, Josh asks his mom when his father's doctor's appointment is. She responds that it is next week. Josh asks if he can go, too. His mom says maybe. Josh then hugs his mother.

Coach's Talk Before the Game – Coach gives a pep talk before the game saying that the team has won ten games in a row, and that the difference between a winning streak and a losing streak is one game. Josh sits on the bench this time to watch the game. He



glances up to see where his parents are, but doesn't see them anywhere. He glances at JB, who is staring at him as though they have seen another ghost.

Josh's Play-by-Play – The game is going badly for the Wildcats. They are down by three and lose the first half.

Text Messages from Mom, Part One – Crystal reveals by text message that she and Chuck have gone home because Chuck wasn't feeling so well, that he is just tired.

The Second Half – JB leads the team to victory to secure the team's chance at the championship.

Tomorrow is the Last Day of School Before Christmas Vacation – The game incident has put both Josh and JB on edge. Rather than studying together, they study alone for the following day's vocabulary test. One such word is "heirloom" – what Chuck considers his championship ring, intending to pass it down to one of his sons when they become "da man". Josh ends up helping JB study vocabulary, and JB thanks him.

Coach Comes Over – During lunch, Coach tells Josh that he and JB need to resolve their issues. He also tells Josh to get his mom something nice for Christmas. She has told Coach that Josh has served his sentence, and will consider letting him back on the team if the team makes it to the championship game.

Es-tranged – To be estranged is to have a bond interrupted, when one person becomes a stranger to another. Alexis's mom and Dad are estranged; Josh and JB are estranged; when Josh threw the ball at JB, he was estranged from himself; and even though Josh and JB are estranged, their father is making them play three-on-three at the rec center.

School's Out – Chuck picks up Josh and JB from school, and the three of them crack jokes like old times. Chuck says that, because his sons have been so good and done so well in school, they get an extra gift. JB asks if they can go to the sneaker store.

The Phone Rings – Josh answers the phone. It is Alexis, asking for JB, but JB is in the shower. She asks Josh to tell JB she'll see him at the rec center.

Basketball Rule #8 – For the best shot, sometimes one must lean back and fade.

When We Get to the Court – Chuck and Josh play one-on-one to warm up for the three-on-three at the rec center. Everyone watches, but then something happens.

At Noon, in the Gym, with Dad – Chuck, while playing, collapses unconscious. While Alexis calls 911, Josh administers CPR, but there is no pulse.

Analysis

As the novel continues, things continue to deteriorate rapidly for Josh. Apart from JB's growing distance, Chuck's health declines dramatically over the course of this part of



the novel. Despite repeated warning signs that his health is in critical condition, Chuck refuses to do anything to change his lifestyle in the least. This ultimately leads to his suffering a massive heart attack while playing ball with Josh. As a result of these horrifying and unexpected changes, Josh becomes even more resentful, and even more angry. Here, the theme of anger returns. Various emotions, from jealousy on the part of JB and Alexis, to worry on the part of his father, cause Josh to become furious.

The theme of family also comes back to the fore, especially through the character of Crystal. Since early in the novel, Crystal has been doing her best to get her husband to eat better, but despite her best efforts, Chuck does everything he can to continue living as he has always lived. Crystal recognizes that changes for her husband are necessary as a reactive effort, but on the part of her sons, will be a proactive and preventative effort. Predispositions for heart conditions are clearly quite common in the Bell family, and with Josh and JB being only 27 years younger than their father, and 36 years younger than their grandfather who died at 45, the chances that they too will end up with serious health problems is high. Out of love and concern for her family, Crystal does everything she can to get them to eat better, from pita chips and hummus for dinner to giving Josh tofu salad for lunch. She also goes through great lengths to get her sons to relax, and to continue to go through life as normal, even though Chuck is in the hospital. Crystal is an incredibly brave woman to keep her own emotions clamped down in order to take care of her sons, and not make them worry about more than they have to.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe JB is justified in how he responds to Josh following the nose incident? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What happens to Chuck at the rec center while playing ball with Josh? How does Josh respond? Why?

Discussion Question 3

How does Crystal handle her husband's being in the hospital? Why is this so important to her?

Vocabulary

churlish, deranged, flagrant, profusely, heirloom, aligned, estranged



Fourth Quarter

Summary

The Doctor Pats Jordan and Me on the Back And Says – The doctor at Saint Luke’s Hospital assures Josh, JB, and their mother, that their father will be alright. He is stable, but in a coma. Josh is unhappy about missing the county semifinals. The doctor tells the boys to talk to their father, that he might hear them. It makes Josh angry, thinking that talking to his father is like pushing water uphill with a rake.

My-o-car-di-al In-farc-tion – A myocardial infarction is when the blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked long enough to cause damage to, or kill, that part of the heart. Josh imagines his father’s myocardial infarction has been caused by doughnuts, fried chicken, and genetics. It is the same thing his grandfather died of, which leaves Josh wondering what that means for him and his brother.

Okay, Dad – Josh speaks to his father as the doctor suggests. He asks his father when he decided to jump ship, saying that he thought his father was da man. He also says that if the team makes it to the finals, he will not miss the big game for a small maybe.

Mom, Since You Asked, I’ll Tell You Why I’m So Angry – Josh lists all the reasons he is angry. These include everything from Dad promising he’d be around forever to JB cutting his hair and not caring, to wanting a girlfriend, because CPR didn’t work on his father, because the backboard is splintered.

Text Messages from Vondie – The Wildcats win their game, 40-39. The team dedicates the game ball to Chuck.

On Christmas Eve – Chuck wakes up on Christmas Eve, and tells Josh he didn’t jump ship.

Santa Claus Stops By – Christmas is celebrated in the hospital room where Chuck is recovering. Family comes in from all over and they stay for two hours. When they leave, Chuck tells Josh and JB to always be there for each other. JB starts crying and Crystal brings him out of the room. Josh remains with Chuck. Chuck says the silence between them means that there are things they want to say, but are not saying, so they need to ask questions until they get answers.

Questions – Josh wants to know why he couldn’t save his father. His father says that Josh has saved him: he is alive and breathing. They continue to ask each other questions of each other, with Chuck saying he needs be in the hospital so his heart damage can be fixed, and Josh asks who will fix his own damaged heart.

Tanka for Language Arts Class – Josh has had no joy over the holidays with his father being in the hospital for nineteen days and counting.



I Don't Think I'll Ever Get Used to – Josh feels even more lonely now that JB is in love, and Chuck is in the hospital.

Basketball Rule #9 – When the game is on the line, one should not be afraid, but grab the ball and bring it to the net.

As We're About to Leave for the Final Game – Crystal receives a phone call from the hospital as Josh and JB are leaving for the game. Chuck has had a second heart attack, and Crystal tells her sons not to worry, and that she'll meet them at the game. JB decides at the last second to hop on his bike and follow his mom to the hospital. Josh catches a ride with Vondie to the game, knowing his dad would want him to play.

During Warm Ups – Coach Hawkins tells Josh if he needs to skip the game to be with his family, it will be okay. Josh rhetorically, in the vein of Chuck, asks the coach if a deaf person can write music.

Text Messages from Mom, Part Two – Crystal explains that Chuck says he'll be fine, and that JB is on the way to the game, even though he doesn't want to play.

For Dad – Josh plays his heart out for his father. He wishes the clock would stop for his life, too. He sees JB in the audience with his head buried against Alexis. As Josh plays, he begins to cry.

The Last Shot – As the counter goes down, Josh takes the last shot of the game, and makes it. The shot is like a bird, flying through the air.

Analysis

The theme of anger continues through this section of the novel. Indeed, an entire chapter of the novel is devoted to the things that have made Josh angry. These range from JB's relationship with Alex to Josh not having a girlfriend to his father being in the hospital to Chuck not having taken care of himself when he had the opportunity to do so, resulting in a series of heart attacks which have kept Chuck in the hospital. In short, there is just about nothing that has gone on in the past several months that has not made Josh angry. Compounding Josh's anger are the feelings of loneliness, which is even worse now that Chuck is in the hospital, and JB is further away from ever, giving Josh the cold shoulder.

Meanwhile, the family seems to be in limbo between Chuck's hospitalization, and the coldness and distance that now separates the brothers. Here, the theme of family returns in important ways. Crystal does her best to balance work with her family, putting all the time, effort, and energy into her family that she can in order to make sure her sons are well-cared for at home, and her husband is well-tended to at the hospital. At the same time, Chuck realizes his life is hanging in the balance, and can see the writing on the wall. There is probably no turning back for him, he understands, and his last major act as a father is to encourage his sons to put aside their differences, and the past, and make up. He wants the brothers to come back together as one.



In the final chapters of the novel, what both brothers have feared but not expected so suddenly, happens: Chuck passes away after one final, massive heart attack. Josh becomes aware of this while he is playing the game. He has already been playing his heart out, but now plays in honor of his father. He dedicates his final shot of the night to his father, and as he does so, he suddenly becomes free once more. The final shot is compared to a bird, with the ball soaring through the air representing flight, and freedom. The ball essentially becomes Chuck's heart – and love – passed down to his son through love of the game of basketball. Here, the reader should note that both Chuck's love for Josh, and Josh's love of his father, becomes a freeing, transformative act through the final shot in the basketball game.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the reasons that Josh is angry? (Choose at least three.) Why is he angry for these reasons?

Discussion Question 2

What is Chuck's last major act as a father? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Josh decide to play basketball instead of going to his father's hospital room? DO you agree or disagree with Josh's choice? Why? How would you react if you were in this situation? Why?

Vocabulary

infarction, coma, symptoms, quivering, fluttering



Overtime

Summary

Article #2 in the Daily News (January 14) – The newspaper carries news of Charlie “Chuck” “Da Man” Bell’s death after a massive heart attack at Saint Luke’s Hospital, including Chuck’s refusal to want to see a doctor in the months leading up to his death. Chuck is only 39.

Where Do We Go From Here? – Josh, unlike basketball, is not prepared for death. It is a game that cannot be won. At the end of the funeral, a limo pulls up to bring Josh, JB, and their mom, back. Josh wishes he could go back.

Star-less – Josh’s father was the light of his world, and now that he is gone, the nights are starless.

Basketball Rule #10 – Losses will always occur. True champions must learn to dance through storms.

There Are So Many Friends – Chuck’s funeral is well-attended, and dozens of people come to the house afterwards. Josh picks up the phone when Alexis calls. Alexis, who could not make the funeral, says she is sorry for Josh’s loss. She invites Josh to a Duke game with herself, JB, her father, and her sister. Josh agrees to go, and thanks her. Coach Hawkins then gives Josh a bear-hug. Josh goes outside alone, believing JB must have gone off to see Alexis.

Free Throws – Josh shoots hoops. He recalls how his father once shot 50 in a row. Josh has only ever been able to do 19. He begins shooting baskets, one after another, as if an angel is bringing the ball to the hoop. Just after basket 49, JB appears a moment later. Josh almost thinks it is his father when JB approaches. JB gives Josh Chuck’s championship ring, saying that Josh has earned it, and that Chuck wanted Josh to have it, that Josh is now da man. Josh says both he and JB are now da man. JB bets Josh he’ll miss the 50th shot. Josh instead passes the ball to JB, who makes the basket. The ball to Josh is like a bird crossing over them.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, so does the theme of coming of age. Josh has had two major experiences that have rocked his life. The first is the realization that he and his brother, though similar, are different people. They can still be close and be best friends without having to do everything together. The second is the death of Chuck, the light of Josh’s world. Josh’s identity has always been through basketball – an identity fostered by Chuck’s own love of the game, and love of his sons. Josh learns that not everything in life will always go his way – whether he has to deal with being alone or the death of a loved one – and so he had better do all he can to still make the most out of every



moment of life he has been given. Chuck's death also comes to signify Josh's coming of age by way of the passing of the torch, so to speak, in the symbolic act of being given his father's championship ring. That ring, in large part, defined Chuck as a man, and now that symbolism of manhood is being given to Josh. Even the signifying of Josh and JB as "da man" is important, for the emphasis is not on a game name, but on the word "man" itself.

At the end of the novel, as Josh is shooting hoops, a scene occurs that the reader should pay particular attention to. Josh, while shooting, hears a voice he believes to be his father's – but it turns out to be JB. This is not merely a mistake on Josh's part, but a symbolic situation in which the son, JB, supplants the father's place. Though Chuck is gone, Josh still has his brother, JB. JB, apart from Josh's mother, will now become the center of his world. A sense of family has been critical to the Bells for their whole lives, and Chuck's passing, though heartbreaking, is also bittersweet, for it brings together the family even closer in the shadow of such terrible events.

Discussion Question 1

How has Josh come of age by the end of the novel? In what ways is he different, and more mature, than at the beginning of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Josh mistake his brother for his father? What is meant by this incident?

Discussion Question 3

What is so important about Josh receiving Chuck's championship ring? Why does Josh receive it instead of JB? How does JB handle this?

Vocabulary

complication, autopsy, promising, inevitable, outstretched



Characters

Josh Bell

Josh Bell is the main character and narrator of the novel “The Crossover” by Kwame Alexander. At twelve years old, Josh is the son of Chuck and Crystal, and the identical twin of JB. Josh is taller than JB, and can be differentiated from his brother physically by the long dreadlocks that Josh wears. Josh idolizes his father, a former basketball superstar, and longs to be just like him. Indeed, Josh’s entire life is basketball. It is his one true passion in life, and when he plays basketball for his middle school, he feels as if he is doing what he is meant for. When Josh plays, he imagines his dreadlocks are like wings helping to give him flight and completing the image of flight while slam dunking. Despite Josh’s love of basketball, he also excels academically, always making honor roll. Josh’s favorite subject is English, and both his love of poetry and vocabulary words is clear throughout the novel. Ultimately, Josh aspires to play ball for Duke University.

When JB gets a girlfriend, and Chuck falls ill, Josh’s world ruptures. Josh becomes lonely, jealous, and ultimately, angry, at JB’s increasing distance and Chuck’s declining health. When Josh loses a bet to JB in which JB is allowed to cut off one of Josh’s dreads, JB accidentally cuts off five. As a result, Josh must have his head shaved. Josh is even further angered by this. During another game, Josh intentionally chucks a hard pass to JB, which hits JB in the face and nearly breaks his nose. As a result, JB stops speaking to Josh for much of the novel, during which time Chuck is admitted to the hospital, suffering a series of heart attacks which ultimately kill him. This devastates Josh and JB – and ultimately helps lead the brothers to repairing their relationship, knowing that their father is gone, and no argument or disagreement is worth taking to the grave. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Josh mistakes JB for Chuck, and this symbolizes how Josh’s brother will come to take his father’s place.

JB

Jordan “JB” Bell is the 12-year-old identical twin brother of Josh, and the son of Chuck and Crystal. JB loves basketball, though not to the same degree his brother does, and struggles academically. Josh often helps JB out, from prepping him for tests to doing his homework for him. When a new girl, Alexis, arrives in school, JB is all over her, and the two begin dating. As this occurs, JB spends less and less time with his family, and more and more time with Alexis. When JB begins to get too cocky, and Josh’s jealousy and anger increase, JB becomes the victim of Josh lashing out by having a ball chucked at his face, and having his nose nearly broken. JB refuses to speak to Josh for much of the novel, only coming to terms with Josh when Chuck dies.



Chuck Bell

Charles “Chuck” “Da Man” Bell is the 39-year-old father of Josh and JB, and the husband of Crystal. Chuck, a former basketball star in the Euroleague, is now retired, having passed on surgery on his leg, disabling him from playing for the LA Lakers. Nevertheless, Chuck longs to get back on the court some way, somehow, for basketball has been his life. He introduces his sons to basketball at a young age, and is able to instill the love of the sport in them. Chuck is, however, in ill-health. He eats horribly and has a genetic predisposition to heart conditions – from which his own father died while in the hospital. As a result of his young age, former career, and distrust of doctors, Chuck is in denial, believing himself to be invincible. Even a series of symptoms leading up to his first heart attack cannot convince him to change his lifestyle. While in the hospital, Chuck suffers two more heart attacks, and ultimately dies.

Crystal Ball

Crystal Bell is the mother of Josh and JB, and the wife of Chuck. She is an assistant principal at school, and loves her family dearly. She is especially deeply in love with Chuck, and strongly encourages her sons to do well academically, for she knows they will not always be able to compete athletically. Realizing her own husband’s athletic prowess is declining with his health, she futilely implores him to see a doctor, and changes her family’s eating habits in order to get everyone to be healthier.

Alexis

Alexis is the new girl at school. She is beautiful, and wears tight jeans and pink Reeboks. She and JB take an instant liking to one another, and end up dating. Alexis comes to dislike Josh for the basketball to JB’s face, being the only one who recognizes the occurrence is no accident. She later makes peace with Josh, inviting him to go along with her, JB, and her family to a Duke basketball game.

Vondie

Vondie Little is the best friend of Josh and JB. He plays basketball with them on their team, often eats lunch with them, and hangs out with them outside of school.

Coach Hawkins

Coach Hawkins is the coach of the Reggie Lewis Middle School Wildcats, the basketball team for which Josh, JB, and Vondie play ball. Coach Hawkins is strict but fair, and encourages his team to always do better. In grave situations, like Chuck’s hospitalization, Coach does not hold it against Josh or JB if they are not present for games.



Police Officer

A police officer stops Chuck for driving with a taillight out. When Chuck admits he has left his license and wallet at home accidentally, the cop is so thrilled to get an autograph from Chuck that he lets Chuck go with only a warning.

Uncle Bob

Uncle Bob is the younger brother of Crystal, who often steps in to make meals for his entire family during holidays. His meals are horrible, with everything from food being burned to food turning green. Nevertheless, he is loved and appreciated for his efforts.

Grandma

Grandma is the mother of Crystal and Bob, the mother-in-law of Chuck, and the grandmother of Josh and JB. She is sweet and loving, and falls off her stoop two days before Thanksgiving, resulting in Uncle Bob making a horrendous dinner for the family.



Symbols and Symbolism

Basketball

Basketballs are used by Josh, JB, Chuck, and numerous others to play the sport of basketball. Early in the novel, the basketball court is compared to the family, and the basketball itself is compared to one's heart. Chuck, through Josh, explains that one should always leave the ball on the court. The ball becomes symbolic of Chuck's heart in this instance, and though his heart fails him, he leaves his heart – and his love for his sons and for the game – with Josh and JB. At the end of the novel, when Josh and JB are using a basketball to shoot hoops, the ball becomes symbolic of their father's soul as it flies freely through the air, crossing overhead, going to Heaven.

Dreadlocks

Dreadlocks are a hairstyle worn by Josh Bell, and formerly, by Chuck during his basketball days. Josh wishes to follow in his father's footsteps, and is inspired by his father to grow dreadlocks. Josh, when watching old videos of his father playing ball, equates his father's dreads to wings, watching his father soar through the air to slam dunk. Josh grows dreads in part for the same reason, but also to differentiate himself from his identical twin brother, JB, who shaves his head. Following a failed bet with JB, JB is given the right to cut off one of Josh's dreads, but accidentally cuts off five. This results in all thirty-seven dreadlocks having to be cut off, which Josh then stores in a box under his bed.

Championship ring

A Euroleague championship ring is owned by Chuck Bell, a symbol of the height of his career as a championship winning player. It is kept in a box in his closet, along with memorabilia from his basketball days. In many ways, the ring defines Chuck's identity as a man. Before Chuck dies, Chuck instructs JB to give Josh the ring – a symbolic passing of the torch by way of love of basketball from father to son, and the passing of the mantle of manhood from father to son. The ring goes to Josh because Josh loves the game like nothing else, and his father recognizes that although JB loves the game, JB does not love the game the way Josh does.

Letters

Letters are kept among Chuck's basketball memorabilia, and are discovered by Josh and JB. The first letter is a free-agent tryout invitation to Chuck from the LA Lakers, and the second is a letter saying that Chuck may not be able to play for the Lakers if he does not have surgery on his knee.



Krispy Kreme doughnuts

Krispy Kreme doughnuts are routinely eaten in large amounts by Chuck. He has a weakness for them, and always finds some excuse to go and get some doughnuts. They are horrible for his health because he eats so many of them, but he doesn't care. Chuck is eventually banned from eating them by his wife, but continues to do so anyways behind her back.

Fried foods

Fried foods, including chicken, are Chuck's favorite kind of meal. He eats fried food regularly and in large amounts, helping to deteriorate his health all the more quickly. Chuck is ultimately banned from eating fried foods by his wife, but he continues to look for reasons and ways to eat them.

Healthy foods

Healthy foods are prepared and served by Crystal for her family. These range from pita chips and hummus to tofu salad. They are designed to change her family's diet, and to get Chuck to eat healthier in order to get his health problems under control.

Sweet tea

Sweet tea is purchased by Alexis at her first basketball game attendance in order to share with JB. As a result Josh begins referring to Alexis as "Miss Sweet Tea".

Newspaper clippings

Newspaper clippings relating to Chuck's days as a basketball player are kept in Chuck's closet, along with other basketball memorabilia. Josh and JB love reading through the newspapers clippings, reveling in their father's past.

Homework

Homework is done by Josh and JB for class. Josh, however, often does JB's homework, both out of love and as a way to make sure that JB's grades stay up so he can play basketball.



Settings

Bell home

The Bell home is located in an unnamed town in what is probably North Carolina, due to the town's proximity to Duke University and Carolina State, and the desires of Josh and JB to attend those schools, respectively. The Bell home is the center of Bell family life. It is where Josh, JB, Chuck, and Crystal live, eat together, and often spend time with one another. The house is also apparently home to a sizable driveway, for a basketball hoop set up there enables the boys to play and practice. When Chuck dies, the Bell home is the scene of the post-funeral gathering, where family, friends, and acquaintances come to eat and pay their respects.

Reggie Lewis Middle School

Reggie Lewis Middle School is the school where Josh and JB attend class, and is the host school to the basketball team on which they play, the Wildcats. The school houses a large gym with a basketball court, which in turn plays host to numerous basketball games throughout the novel. The middle school is where JB and Alexis first meet, and is where Josh hits JB in the face with a basketball. The middle school is also the site of the championship game that Josh plays in as his father dies.

Rec Center

The local rec center is visited daily by town locals where they play various sports, including basketball. Josh, JB, and Chuck play ball at the rec center at least once a week on Sundays, and sometimes during the week as well depending on schedules. It is at the local rec center that Chuck has his first major heart attack, leading to his hospitalization.

Saint Luke's Hospital

Saint Luke's Hospital is where Chuck is brought to be treated following his major heart attack. Saint Luke's Hospital is where Chuck will spend the rest of his life, suffering two more major heart attacks, the second of which will kill him. During Chuck's stay in the hospital, Josh, JB, and Crystal visit him regularly, though Josh hates visiting because of the hospital itself, and the reasons for his father's being there.

Europe

Europe is where Chuck spent a good part of his basketball career, where he played with the Euroleague. Chuck made a name for himself there and at home in the United States

as a result. In Europe, Chuck lead his team to a successful championship game, made a lot of money, and was ultimately offered a chance to try out for the Lakers.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “The Crossover” by Kwame Alexander. Family, thematically, involves mutual love, compassion, loyal between, as well as emotional, physical, and even spiritual support and encouragement of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave according to the typical family structure. In the novel, it is Josh’s family, the Bells, and his relationship to them, that forms the theme of family.

In the novel, Josh refers to his father as the backboard – the backbone – of the family, and of his own life. Chuck holds his family together, having carefully saved his professional basketball money to provide for his family, allowing his wife to follow a career in education, and his sons to want to follow his footsteps in basketball. Chuck is everything that Josh aspires to be, from a good man to a basketball star. Indeed, JB looks up to his father in the same way. At the same time, Chuck and his wife, Crystal, are deeply in love. Twice during the book, Josh listens to his parents arguing, and becoming quiet – knowing that they have gone from fighting to making love.

Josh spends a lot of time with his father throughout the novel, as JB drifts away, now interested in girls. Chuck hands down some sage advice and important wisdom to Josh related to life that comes through the metaphor of basketball. For example, Josh should understand that life isn’t always about winning, but learning to dance in the rain during the storm. Chuck is teaching Josh not only to be prepared to deal with loss, but to handle it with grace, to find reason to even revel in defeat. In keeping with Chuck being the backboard of the family, he tells Josh and JB that the court is their family, and the ball is their heart, and they should always leave the ball in the court, meaning that family always comes first. It is a lesson that Josh takes to heart.

When Josh’s father dies, everything appears to fall apart for Josh. The backboard, he says, is splintered. The nights, he explains, are starless, for his father was the light in his life. He has no idea what holds together the family anymore. While shooting hoops after his father’s funeral, Josh believes his father has returned when he hears JB’s voice, but then realizes it is only JB. Chuck’s passing causes Josh to realize that, although he doesn’t have his father anymore, he still has his brother. The mistaking of his brother for his father demonstrates the taking of the father’s place by the brother, symbolically, in the eyes of Josh. At the same time, Josh grows closer to his mother – and so Josh’s brother and mother will become the new backboard in the family.

Basketball

Basketball serves to be an important theme and motif in the novel “The Crossover” by Kwame Alexander. Basketball is not only a sport to the Bell family – especially to Josh



and Chuck – but it is a way of life, and the purpose for living and breathing, apart from family.

Charles “Chuck “Da Man” Little is not only Josh’s father, but is a former basketball star, having been a Euroleague Champion, made over a million dollars, and having given up his career for the Lakers because he didn’t want to have surgery on his knee. Chuck lives for basketball. Apart from his own love of playing, he has instilled a love of basketball into his sons from the age of two, having them shooting hoops from the time they could barely walk. Every Sunday after church, Chuck and his sons play ball at the rec center. Each night after dinner, Chuck makes his sons throw free throws to keep them on their toes and to keep them in practice. Though Chuck doesn’t have to work, he is looking to get work as a basketball coach at a nearby college – because he loves the game itself.

Josh, like his father, has an absolute love of basketball. Apart from having an affinity of the sport instill in him since infancy, and despite having to shoot hoops after dinner (which Josh does not mind), Josh truly has a love, an absolute passion, for the game. Everything Josh is, is through basketball. His popularity at school owes largely to his basketball skill. His reputation as a basketball player owes largely to his skill on the court. Josh’s identity comes through basketball: he truly feels himself, and at home, on the court. His efforts on the court make him feel free, as if he can fly. He is weightless when he is playing basketball, and nothing else in the world matters.

Basketball also comes to be seen as something metaphorical for life advice given to Josh and JB by Chuck. Basketball rules related to life are scattered throughout the novel. For example, when the basketball game is on the line, the player should not hesitate to grab the ball and go all-in. In life, when things get tough, and when things truly count, people should not be afraid to head in and take the chance. Even when Chuck suffers his second heart attack at the hospital, he would rather Josh be out playing basketball than being at the hospital. Even Crystal would rather JB at least go watch the basketball game, rather than remaining at the hospital. Josh, at the championship game, knows that his father would prefer him being on the basketball court, and the championship game becomes something of an ode to his father. Josh plays that final game not only for himself, but for his father as well. In that game, father and son are made one through their love of each other, and their love of the game of basketball.

Coming of Age

Coming of age is an important theme in the novel “The Crossover” by Kwame Alexander. Thematically, coming of age includes the moral, emotional, and even spiritual maturation of an individual, usually young, based on experiences, challenges, and difficulties in life. In the novel “The Crossover”, the character of Josh comes of age as his world, and everything he knows, changes before his eyes.



When the novel begins, Josh and his twin brother, JB, are both obsessed with basketball and are difficult to tell apart physically. While Josh has a greater penchant for academics, as well as basketball, JB is more relaxed and down-to-earth. Both brothers, however, deeply love and admire their father, former basketball star Chuck “Da Man” Bell. They aspire to be like him, and their world consists of their father, his history, their mother, and basketball. Indeed, the bond between Josh and JB is so close that Alexis is prompted to ask if it is true the brothers can both tell what the other is thinking – a figurative and a literal query.

In the autumn, things begin to change dramatically for Josh. Chuck’s health declines precipitously, which worries Josh like crazy. JB’s relationship with Alexis takes off, and he begins to spend more and more time with her rather than Josh or Chuck. Josh, full of worry about his father, loneliness from not having a girlfriend or JB, anger from JB’s accidental cutting of his dreadlocks, and angry that things seem to be conspiring against him when all that mattered before was basketball, lashes out. He hits JB in the face with a basketball during a game, nearly breaking his nose, and nearly breaking the brotherly bond between them. As a result, Josh is banned from basketball by his mom. Chuck later suffers a massive heart attack which puts him in the hospital. Now, Josh truly feels alone.

Chuck does not recover. A successive heart attack in the hospital in January ultimately kills him. Josh feels both angry and sorry for himself, but he loses himself in basketball, by putting everything he has into playing. He comes to take seriously his father’s advice about how to live life, and comes to realize that not everything will always go his way. As such, he makes peace with his brother, and in so doing renews his relationship with his JB. Josh comes to realize that, with his father gone, all he has left are his mother and brother, and so he comes to appreciate them more deeply. He now understands that disagreements and jealousy cannot come between them anymore. Indeed, in the climactic scene, JB symbolically takes Chuck’s place in Josh’s life.

Josh also comes to realize, through his father, that there are consequences to one’s actions in life that go above and beyond merely being banned from playing basketball. For example, Chuck’s decision not to have knee surgery resulted in his inability to sign with the LA Lakers, while Chuck’s lifelong poor eating habits, in conjunction with his genetics, make him prone to the series of heart attacks which end up killing him – at the age of 39. Josh sees this all clearly, and knows now that he is not only “da man”, but “the man” of the house. He cannot behave like a child anymore, but rather, must behave like a young adult, whose actions will have tremendous consequences that extend beyond the court.

Anger

Anger is an important theme in the novel “The Crossover” by Kwame Alexander. Anger becomes essential to the plot of the novel, specifically for the Bell family, and affects the plot in many different ways. At various points in the novel, each of the characters contends with some form or degree of anger, often in conjunction with other emotions.



Josh's anger is perhaps the most notable, for he is the narrator, and quick to explain his anger. He is angry at the fact that JB is spending more time with his girlfriend instead of the family – particularly, Josh and Chuck. Josh is further angered by his jealousy of JB having a girlfriend in general, and the anger and jealousy fuel each other. Josh comes to realize the dangerous health situation that his father is in, and this anger combines with worry, which makes his anger dangerous. When all of these negative feelings are combined with anger, the result is explosive. Josh takes everything out on JB during a basketball game, making a hard pass directly at JB's face – which in turn nearly breaks JB's nose.

JB's own anger is clearly apparent following the game, and following his release from the hospital with a nearly-broken nose. No matter how many times Josh apologizes to JB, JB remains angry with Josh. Whenever JB can help it, he doesn't even want to be around Josh because he is so angry at Josh. Whether it is at home, at school, or driving somewhere, JB refuses to speak to Josh. When something has to be said to Josh, JB will speak through his mother or his father in order to communicate with Josh. The anger the brothers feel for one another nearly destroys their relationship.

Anger is also present in the novel when it comes to Josh and JB's parents. Crystal is absolutely worried about Chuck's health, knowing that Chuck has spent a lifetime not eating healthily, and is genetically predisposed to heart troubles. That Chuck will not see a doctor, and will not eat more healthily, infuriates Crystal. She goes so far as to ban Chuck from eating at certain places, and eating certain things, all to help him live longer and recover his health. Chuck, however, doesn't care, preferring to sneak snacks and eat unhealthy foods when Crystal isn't looking – which only angers her further. Her anger comes by way of utter worry and concern for Chuck's life – and is a reaction to Chuck's obstinacy to do what he needs to do to secure his life.

Flight

Flight is an important motif in the novel "The Crossover" by Kwame Alexander. Flight in the novel is a symbolic motif, one meaning freedom, passion, and identity in different places – and all three at the same time in other places as well. Flight becomes essential to the plot as a way to deepen the meaning behind the events that are unfolding, and becomes key to understanding the characters and their lives.

When Josh talks about basketball, much of it is owed to the image of his father, who, when younger, had dreadlocks like Josh now has. While watching old videos of his dad, to Josh, it is like Chuck is flying through the air while playing basketball – especially when Chuck slam dunks the ball. Chuck's long hair flies up like wings as he jumps, giving even further the impression of flight, of absolute freedom in doing what one loves, what one is passionate about. Nothing else in the world matters except for that moment, and that flight – that freedom – through the air. It is among the reasons that Josh grows his own hair long into dreadlocks.



When Josh plays basketball himself, it is a freeing experience. His own dreadlocks become like wings as he flies through the air and dunks. Nothing can hold him back, and nothing can stop him when he is doing what he loves. When he plays basketball, he knows he is doing what he is meant for. It feels totally and completely right – and becomes his very identity. When he does what he loves, he has the feeling of absolute weightlessness, and of freedom. In effect, he is soaring forward toward his dreams and what he wants to do with his life. When Josh plays basketball, nothing else in the world matters. He is able to escape to freedom from the problems and issues of everyday life.

When their father dies, Josh and JB shoot hoops after the funeral. Both brothers feel like the weight of the world has fallen on their shoulders, and like their world has come undone without their father in it anymore. When Josh mistakes JB for his father – the symbolic act of the brother taking the father's place – Josh invites JB to shoot a basket. When he does so, the ball becomes like a bird to Josh, soaring high overhead, crossing over Josh and JB as it flies – and in so doing, becomes symbolic of a bird, and of freedom, and of their father crossing over from one world into the next –the flight to Heaven, a place of pure freedom from suffering.

Styles

Point of View

Kwame Alexander tells his novel “The Crossover” from the first-person, limited-omniscient point of view of main character and narrator, Josh Bell. The novel is told from Josh’s perspective because it is Josh’s story, and Josh’s journey of coming of age. All of the events of the novel are experienced by Josh personally, and related personally, in the first person, by Josh. This allows the reader an intimate look at the thoughts and feelings that Josh has, and which no one else in the novel knows or has access to. The limited-omniscient aspect of the novel provides a sense of suspense and realism, for no 12-year-old boy will know everything going on in the world – from the true extent of Chuck’s heart disease to the inner workings of JB’s mind. As such, the reader learns things only as Josh learns them and relates them.

Language and Meaning

Kwame Alexander tells his novel “The Crossover” in language that is educated and poetic. Because the novel is narrated by Josh Bell, the prose employed is fitting to his character. Josh loves school, especially English class, and the novel is peppered with words like “pulchritudinous” and “calamity” – all words that Josh has learned in school. The use of these words therefore reflects Josh’s education and earning of honor roll status. The poetic nature of the novel owes not only to the structure of the novel itself, but also to the fact Josh is, himself, poetic – owing in large part to his love of English class. Given Josh’s characterization, and the structure of the novel itself, the academic-poetic nature of the writing creates a sense of realism and believability for the plot.

Structure

Kwame Alexander divides his novel “The Crossover” into five major parts, with each part being subdivided into unnumbered chapters. Each part is labeled according to a basketball game. For example, the first part of the novel is “Warm Up” while the second part is entitled “First Quarter”. Each part deals with a broad set of events. The first part, “Warm Up” features a lot of background information about characters that will be important in the parts to come. Each chapter therein is composed entirely of a poem or free verse, and centers around a specific incident, event, or experience in Josh’s life. While the part “Fourth Quarter” deals with Chuck being in the hospital and the championship game, the chapter therein entitled “Questions” involves Josh questioning his father about his health and his past.



Quotes

See, when I play ball, I'm on fire. When I shoot, I inspire. The hoop's for sale, and I'm the buyer.

-- Josh Bell (Josh Bell paragraph 4)

Importance: Josh demonstrates not only his poetic touch with words, but his skills with a ball through this quote. Basketball is Josh's life, and Josh reveals that he is incredibly talented when it comes to the sport. Indeed, basketball essentially sums up all that Josh hopes to be.

Always leave your heart on the court.

-- Josh Bell (Basketball Rule # 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: In one of Chuck's rules related by Josh, a court is symbolic of family, and the ball is symbolic of one's heart. One should always leave one's heart in the court means that one should always put family first, and should always put their heart in the care of family. This quote will prove to be both telling and ironic, as Chuck's heart will fail him, but his heart – symbolically and figuratively – will remain with his sons and his wife after he is gone.

The HUGE bald patch on the side of my head is a dreadful calamity.

-- Josh Bell (Ca-lam-i-ty paragraph 3)

Importance: Josh's dreadlocks, having been cut off, leave a bald spot on his head. Josh loves his locks, for they add to the image and feeling of flight when he is playing and dunks the ball. The dreadlocks are also emulative of his father's hairstyle back in the day, and serve as a way to differentiate brother from brother.

I wonder why my dad never had surgery on his patella tendinitis.

-- Josh Bell (Pa-tel-la Ten-di-ni-tis paragraph 4)

Importance: When Josh and JB discover that their father had a shot at playing for the Lakers, they also discover that their father never had the surgery needed to correct his knee to be able to play. Why Chuck would have walked away from such a promising opportunity over simple surgery is confusing to Josh.

I WAS crazy. Crazy in love. With my twin boys.

-- Chuck Bell (Dad Takes Us to Krispy Kreme and Tells Us His Favorite Story (Again) paragraph 2)

Importance: Here, Chuck explains two things to his sons. First, he demonstrates his deep and abiding love for Josh and JB. Second, he demonstrates that, since the boys were little, he has had them playing basketball – not out of the desire to see his sons follow in his footsteps, but to expose his sons to something that mattered so much to him in life.



If you miss enough of life's free throws you will pay in the end.
-- Josh Bell (Basketball Rule #4 paragraph 1)

Importance: In one of Chuck's rules related by Josh, life is full of opportunities that need to be taken. But when one follows up on such an opportunity, or free throw, it had better be done with all the heart and skill possible in order to make sure the ball goes in, and the goal is achieved. If enough opportunities are missed, it will be dreadfully felt in the end. This rule can be extrapolated to reflect on two things: first, Chuck's refusal to have surgery to play for the Lakers; and second, the repeated chances Chuck has to have his health correct. In the end, he pays by not having a contract with the Lakers, and by suffering massive heart attacks which ultimately kill him.

The only thing JB is listening to is the sound of his heart bouncing on the court of love.
-- Josh Bell (Conversation paragraph 9)

Importance: When Alexis enters the picture, JB tunes out. JB is so head-over-heels smitten with Alexis that he can't think of anything else, and nothing else in the world matters to him. At first, what seems like a dopey crush soon turns into something life-changing for JB, and for Josh.

You are walking home by yourself and your brother owns the world.
-- Josh Bell (Second-Person paragraph 1)

Importance: The more time JB spends with Alexis, the more time Josh is alone, without his brother. As such, Josh becomes not only lonesome, but jealous as well. Josh comes to wish that he, too, had a girlfriend, and that his brother was around to spend more time with him more often.

If we make it to the finals, I will not miss the big game for a small maybe.
-- Josh Bell (Okay, Dad paragraph 1)

Importance: While Chuck is in a coma, Josh tells his father, in essence, that he had better survive and recover. The "maybe chance" of Chuck's surviving and getting his health back on track is not enough for Josh to accept. If Chuck cannot get better, Josh will not miss the big game for it. Only if his father recovers will Josh miss the big game.

Because our backboard is splintered.
-- Josh Bell (Mom, Since You Asked, I'll Tell You Why I'm So Angry paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, Josh explains to his mother why he is so angry all the time, lately. Among the reasons is the fact that Chuck is gone. Josh has long viewed his father as the backbone – or backboard – of the family, keeping everything together, giving everyone strength. With the backboard broken, it feels like everything is broken.

I am unprepared for death. This is a game I cannot play. It has no rules, no referees. You cannot win.
-- Josh Bell (Where Do We Go From Here? paragraph 2)



Importance: Josh admits that death is the one thing in his young life that he is not ready to experience, that there is no way that basketball or sports can be related to death. No one wins when it comes to death, he explains –including the people who lose a loved one.

My father was the light of my world, and now that he's gone, each night is starless.
-- Josh Bell (Star-less paragraph 4)

Importance: Here, Josh explains the true extent of his feelings and love for his father. Josh's father was his hero and role model, and was the most important part of his life. He compares his father to being the light of his world, giving purpose to everything, and now without his father around, the light is all gone.