

Dairy Queen Study Guide

Dairy Queen by Catherine Gilbert Murdock

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Plot Summary

Dairy Queen is a coming-of-age story about a high school sophomore, D.J. Schwenk, who learns the power of communication. D.J. narrates the novel. Therefore readers are privy to her feelings and thoughts.

At the beginning of the novel, D.J. is disgruntled and bears resentment toward her family. She is angry with her father for being hurt so that she has to maintain the farm by herself; she is angry with her mother for working two jobs and never being home; and she is angry with her two older brothers for leaving home and never speaking with the family and her younger brother for never talking. She has low self-esteem and hangs out with Amber, who puts everyone else down as a defense mechanism for her own secrets and insecurities. D.J. describes herself to readers as dumb, unattractive, and slow, creating low expectations for herself.

Readers gradually learn about the intense rivalry between D.J.'s high school (Red Bend) and the neighboring high school (Hawley) and why she so strongly detests Brian Nelson. They also learn why her older brothers left and don't speak with the family any more. Each time backstory is provided, it grows more evident to readers that D.J. is none of the negative things that she claims to be. She seems to realizing this slowly as well.

One plot-line in the novel is the web of broken relationships in the Schwenk family. No one in the family communicates their thoughts and feelings, so misunderstandings grow into resentments and anger, until a boiling point is reached and a major fight ensues. Because they refuse to talk about their issues, grudges are held, and the family has reached a point of gridlock where communication has completely broken down and their relationships are stuck.

Another plot-line in the story is Brian and D.J.'s relationship. The novel follows them from spiteful enemies, to friends and confidants, and eventually to being interested in one another romantically. While D.J. comes from a family of very poor communicators, Brian comes from a family where communication is a consistent part of daily life. D.J. helps Brian train for football, as she is very knowledgeable about football and hard work, and Brian teaches D.J. how to communicate.

The theme tying the two plots together is football. Everyone in D.J.'s family is involved in football in some way and Brian plays football for the opposing high school's team. The novel ends with the relationships all finding a path toward final healing, yet there is still ground to be covered. This novel is the first in a series by Catherine Murdock.



Chapter 1: Schwenk Farm - Chapter 3: Brian Bails

Chapter 1: Schwenk Farm - Chapter 3: Brian Bails Summary

Chapter 1 opens with the narrator talking in a very casual tone, as though she were speaking with a friend, describing her morning. It's evident from the tone and topics that the narrator is a teenage girl, but her name and age are not given. The narrator explains to readers that she lives on a dairy farm with her dad, mom, and younger brother. Her father hurt his hip a few months ago in an accident involving a cow manure spreader and can no longer perform many of the farm duties, so the narrator has had to take over. She clearly knows a lot about dairy farming and seems to really care about one particular cow named Joe, which is 11 years old and has failing health.

The chapter ends on a cliff-hanger, when a boy named Brian Nelson arrives on the farm and the family seems shocked to see him.

More background information about the narrator is provided in Chapter 2. Readers learn her name, D.J., and that she is a high school sophomore and there is a deep and long-running rivalry with the high school from the neighboring town of Hawley. After explaining why she detests Hawley, D.J. explains that Brian Nelson is Hawley's backup quarterback. She goes on to call him "lazy, stuck-up" and "spoiled." While providing some background information for readers through memories, the narrator also casually mentions her two older brothers, Win and Bill. She is clearly very proud of them, especially Will and what a good football player he was in high school.

D.J. reveals some typical teenage insecurities, as she calls herself "dumb" because she failed English due to all the time she had to put on her family's farm. She is convinced Brian thinks he is better than her and is looking down on her, so she goes out of her way to prove herself coming across as very rude and standoffish. "I was so busy showing off how good I was that I almost broke my thumb and then had to pretend nothing was wrong, which wasn't so great for my mood."

D.J. learns along with readers that Brian had shown up to help work on the farm only because his football coach, Jimmy Ott, said he had to if he wanted to be a starter that season in football. D.J. continues to supply backstory, explaining that her father used to run the Hawley football program alongside Jimmy Ott, but eventually had to leave it in order to take care of the family dairy farm after Grandma Joyce died and D.J. was born.

Chapter 3 - D.J.'s dad instructed her to find something for Brian to help with on the farm, essentially putting her in charge of him. She enjoys this position of power over Brian and takes advantage of it by allowing him to make mistakes and comparing his work ethic as an athlete to her older brothers.



D.J. goes into great detail for readers about the baling process for the hay, showing the depth of her knowledge and experience. It is clear that D.J. and her brothers have always had to work very hard for what they have and they know it. A large reason she dislikes Brian as much as she does is due to the privilege she believes he experiences in life. It makes her mad that he tires before she does and complains throughout the hay baling process.

It's also becoming clearer at this point that D.J. can be manipulative. She is good at getting her point across in backhanded ways, like when she makes Brian look bad in her father's eyes by asking if he was his football team's captain, already knowing full well that he wasn't. "Dad and I don't get along most of the time. Maybe all of the time. but he sure did cooperate with me on that one, even if he didn't know he was doing it."

When D.J. admits to readers that Brian's comments about her older brothers being in Chicago instead of around to help the family hurt her so bad that it made her gut hurt, she reveals that there is some family history that has yet to be revealed.

D.J. shows her first sign of not completely hating Brian when she admits he has "the prettiest arm I'd ever seen" when he was throwing a football for D.J.'s dog Smut. She also begrudgingly admits that she thinks he is handsome, but still comes across defensive about it and seems to be trying to convince herself more than anyone else that she is not attracted to him.

Chapter 3 ends with D.J. pushing Brian's buttons one too many times, and he gets so upset that she is very rude back to her and walks out mid-job. D.J. enjoys telling her parents that Brian gave up, as she believes it makes her look even better, although finishing the job alone was very hard.

Chapter 1: Schwenk Farm - Chapter 3: Brian Bails Analysis

The narrator's tone reveals a great deal about her. Although her name, age, and location are not known in the first chapter, her personality clearly shines through just by her language. She speaks matter-of-factly and openly shares her opinions. Her subject choices in the first three chapters (family, chores, school, boys, and school sports) strongly suggest that she is a teenager girl long before the author confirms this.

D.J.'s voice also involves humor. She goes on for several pages about why she doesn't like Brian Nelson and how he is a "stuck-up" and "spoiled" kid, then the first words he speaks in the book are extremely polite, asking her father about his hip and explaining he is there to help then out with farm work for the day. The intensity in which D.J. talks about how much she dislikes Brian Nelson suggests she might actually have a crush on him, as young girls sometimes try to disguise their attraction because they are embarrassed or afraid the feeling won't be mutual.



This seems even more likely after D.J. admits to readers that she thinks she is dumb. She decides that Brian must be thinking of how much better he is than her when they meet in Chapter 2 because she failed English. However, there is really no way for Brian to even know that. D.J. reacts to her feelings of inadequacy by being extremely defensive around Brian, which only puts him on the defense as well, creating hostile interactions between the two.

The theme of pride emerges early in the book. D.J.'s pride in her family and how hard they work is obvious by Chapter 2. She talks about the jobs each family member does on the farm as well as proudly sharing her older brothers' athletic accomplishments. D.J.'s pride is also a character flaw at times, as she lets it get in the way of her true feelings, like when her favorite old cow was taken away to be killed and refused to show that it made her sad: "There was no way in this universe I was going to let Brian Nelson of all people see me get all mushy over a cow."

Competition is another theme that dovetails with pride. Based on D.J.'s descriptions of her brothers, and seeing how she and Curtis gang up on Brian while bailing hay, the competitive nature of the family is demonstrated. An in-depth description about the rivalry between D.J.'s and Brian's high schools also supports the theme of competition, as it is a metaphor for social hierarchies; Hawley has more of everything - especially money.

The theme of responsibility is also established in the first chapters of the book, as D.J.'s responsibilities on the dairy farm have greatly increased since her father's injury. She is dealing with the typical teenage angst and insecurities as well as the responsibility of keeping her family's farm in working order.

The title of Chapter 3 is a play on words, as it is about Brian literally bailing hay alongside D.J., but he also leaves (bailes) before the task is finished because he and D.J. argue.



Chapter 4: Amber - Chapter 6: Jimmu Ott Steps In

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Chapter 4 - D.J. describes her best friend Amber for readers. Amber is a year older than D.J. and described as 'able to appear very tough and intimidating', yet the stories D.J. shares about experiences with her friend are fun and silly memories. She feels very comfortable with Amber and enjoys hearing Amber's stories - although they are likely exaggerated - about engaged couples at work because Amber works for a catering company.

The chapter shows D.J., Amber, and Amber's friend Kari acting like typical teenage girls joking around, making judgmental statements, and privately making fun of the more popular kids. It seems to make them feel better to put the other kids down. When Brian and his friends make fun of D.J. openly, calling her "Dairy queen," Amber and Kari demonstrate loyalty and jump to her defense.

Chapter 5 - Brian and his friends' taunts the night before are still weighing heavily on D.J.'s mind the following morning. She already has insecurities about living on a farm and not having much money, but to have it pointed out in such a mean and public way not only embarrassed her and hurt her feelings, but it increased her insecurities about the stereotypes of farmers smelling bad and being "dumb."

D.J. clarifies to readers that she was not forced to take over the main responsibilities at the farm. Although she was not excited about it, after seeing her father 'grey and nearly puking' after trying to move the manure spreader one evening, she volunteered. This demonstrates D.J.'s love for her family, as she sacrifices her time and ability to participate in the school sports she loves in order to help her dad have time to heal.

When D.J.'s parents are gone attending Curtis' baseball game and D.J. is left alone on the farm, she takes time to try and look at it through someone like Brian's eyes. She does not like what she sees. Everything is in disarray, looking broken and dirty. The farm has not looked like this in the past, when D.J.'s grandpa was still alive, and is makes her sad to see how the standards have been let go. However, D.J. is also frustrated that no one is taking responsibility for the upkeep of the farm. Finally, she funnels her anger about Brian, school, and her family into a physical task - cleaning out the barn.

Chapter 5 ends with another hint to the family drama involving D.J.'s older brothers. She mentions that her father had started a fight with them "that ruined our whole family."



Chapter 6 - D.J.'s full name, Darlene Joyce, is revealed, but she insists she hates it and only wants to be called D.J.

Family friends Jimmy and Kathy Ott come over for lunch and D.J. has a good relationship with them. When Jimmy asks her what she thinks of Brian coming over to help, D.J. makes a concerted effort to come across as mature, so she simply says he had a good arm but needs a personal trainer. Jimmy later takes advantage of a moment alone with D.J. and asks if she will be Brian's personal trainer. D.J. is completely taken aback by the question. She says she doesn't want to do it, but is just saying that because she believes Brian would never listen to her and doesn't respect her. She continues thinking about it all afternoon and even after she said 'no' and Jimmy left.

After bringing up the idea of athletes respecting their coach at the dinner table that night and listening to what her parents had to say on the subject, D.J. reflects on her actions with Brian and decides she acted poorly and immaturely toward him when he'd shown up to help, which is why he doesn't respect her. She is having a change of attitude.

Chapter 6 is also the first time D.J. comments about "writing this all down" suggesting to the reader that the book is not just D.J.'s internal monologue, but perhaps her diary.

Chapter 4: Amber - Chapter 6: Jimmu Ott Steps In Analysis

D.J.'s age and immaturity shows through in Chapter 4, as she engages in many traditional American teenage activities, such as drinking beer, hanging out at various teenage spots around town, and talking about the other kids in her school. She has a small close-knit friend base - primarily, Amber - and depends on those relationships as an outlet for her frustrations as well as a brief escape from the responsibilities of the farm.

D.J.'s resentment toward her father is evident in her language; she blames him for disconnecting her brothers from the family, as well as for getting hurt and delaying his surgery making it so she had more responsibility than she really wanted. Despite her resentment, however, D.J. is also looking for her father's approval. When he compliments her on cleaning out the barn, she down-plays it to readers suggesting he may have just wanted to look like a good dad in front of his friends the Otts, but she still thinks the comment is "nice" and wishes she had more time to enjoy it.

Jimmy Ott offers D.J. a bit of the acknowledgement she is seeking from her father. While over for lunch, Jimmy asks to see the barn D.J. has been working on cleaning out, and he points out how much work she's been doing on the farm overall. D.J. is uncomfortable with the recognition and immediately downplays it. Jimmy also shows that he respects D.J. by asking her to train his star athlete Brian, citing her history of athleticism and her knowledge of what hard work and training is all about as her qualifications to be the trainer. Although D.J. responds with her usual self-deprivation at



first, the compliments get her thinking about whether or not she could be a trainer, and her confidence gradually grows until she agrees to do it.

The theme of respect gains prominence in Chapter 6. D.J. seeks respect from her father and feels entitled to it due to all the work she does around the farm, but she is beginning to learn that a large part of respect is an attitude and it must be earned.

This book is a coming-of-age story, as D.J. is in the middle of her transformation from child to adult. She still shows many insecurities and displays childish behaviors, but she also shows maturity with her self-sacrifice for her family and ability to self-reflect and not only recognize, but admit to readers, when she is being immature.



Chapter 7: Sunday - Chapter 9: Dairy Queen

Chapter 7: Sunday - Chapter 9: Dairy Queen Summary

D.J. is happy that she doesn't have to go to church on Sunday morning with her family anymore because she needs to stay home to milk the cows. Just as she is preparing to roll over and go back to sleep, she is surprised to see Brian's Cherokee pull up, and he goes straight into the barn. Brian puts himself directly to work on the hay stacks, hoping to get the work done before the family is back from church. He is as surprised to see D.J. there as she is to see him. D.J. helps him with the hay, and after a lot of silence and a few awkward exchanges, they started warming up a bit. By the time they are done with the hay, D.J. actually voluntarily gives Brian a soda and they seemed to be working together almost naturally.

D.J.'s mom invites Brian for lunch and he ends up getting along with the family quite well. After lunch, they even play a bit of football together, which is very meaningful in the Schwenk family. D.J. compares it to playing with her brothers, which readers know by now she thinks quite highly of.

Brian ends the game abruptly after looking at his watch, saying he had to go. When D.J.'s mother asks if Brian's parents will be concerned about him for being late, a family situation is hinted at when he quickly says, "They don't care" and instead says he is supposed to be meeting friends, although that last part doesn't seem true. D.J. walks Brian to his car and the subject of her training him is brought up again. It is obvious they both want to try it, but neither want to be the first to suggest it. They finally - awkwardly - agree that she will train him. They also agree not to tell anyone. D.J. ends the chapter saying her training Brian is one of the main reason she is writing all this down.

D.J.'s excitement to train Brian is palpable. She begins planning right away what she will do to help him improve and how she will fit it into her busy schedule of farm chores. As excited as she is, however, D.J. opts to not tell her dad or her best friend Amber about the arrangement. Toward the end of the day, when D.J. let the idea sink in further, her usual self depriving doubts came out and she begins worrying that Brian might blow her off, or that he is just teasing her by agreeing to the deal and will later tease her and tell all of his friends. She also fears that even if Brian is serious and allows her to train him, what if she isn't any good at it and Brian doesn't improve? Finally, D.J. realizes that even if everything works out ideally and Brian does improve under her coaching, her high school, Curtis, Amber, and maybe the whole town will be mad at her for helping the other team improve.

D.J. offers up some background on the Red Bend-Hawley rivalry. Two years ago, her brother Bill had trained harder than ever all summer in order to win the big game against Hawley, just as his older brother Will had done. According to D.J., Bill played an



amazing game where he did pretty much all of the work for the Red Bend team. Hawley was ahead the whole game, and just as Bill intercepted a pass and ran for a touchdown to bring Red Bend back into the game, the Red Bend kicker missed his kick and Hawley won. Hawley were sore winners, and the worst of them was Brian Nelson, who teased Bill for being so upset he cried. This story explains why it is such a big deal for D.J. to be training Brian - he is an enemy of her beloved older brother.

Brian and D.J. begin their test week of training. D.J. tries to give him pointers in a respectful manner, remember that Jimmy Ott told her if she wants Brian to respect her, she has to earn it and treat him with respect as well. Brian does what D.J. instructs him to and even offers her some ideas about cleaning the barn. The two are beginning to lower their barriers around each other. After their workout, Brian seems extremely angry and D.J. figures he will leave and never come back, but instead he shocks her by apologizing. He apologizes for the way he treated Bill after the big game two years ago, as well as for he and his friends making fun of D.J. the week before. D.J. is completely caught off guard and can only mutter, "Um, thanks."

The apology resonates with D.J. for several hours, as she explains to readers how unheard of an apology is in her family. No one does it. After giving it a great deal of thought, she also realizes that all the while she thought she was making Brian mad by talking about her brothers and how hard they worked, he was really just mad at himself and feeling worse and worse about the way he had treated Bill.

Brian's apology also makes D.J. stop and think more about the means things he has said to her. He had called her a cow and said she does whatever she is told without complaining even if she doesn't want to, accusing her of not having a mind of her own. The more she thinks about this, the more D.J. begins to agree with Brian. For instance, she is very angry with her father about having to take over the farm responsibility, but she never says a word to him about it. Instead, she just keeps doing the work begrudgingly. This realization hurts D.J.'s feelings.

Chapter 7: Sunday - Chapter 9: Dairy Queen Analysis

A relationship is being built between D.J.'s entire family and Brian. When he comes back, puts in a good day's work, and then relaxes and has fun with the family, the whole relationship between Brian and the Schwenks begins changing. They all realize they can like each other and they have something in common - football. D.J. comments a couple of times to readers that playing football with Curtis and Brian reminds her of playing with her older brothers, whom she misses very much. This admission is a major indication to readers that she is coming around to liking Brian.

By providing the backstory about the Red Bend-Hawley football game two years ago, D.J. helps readers understand why her training Brian is such a surprise to those who know, and why she doesn't want anyone else finding out. She could be seen as a peacekeeper, or a possible bridge for two opposing sides, but she would more likely just be viewed by many in Red Bend as a traitor. D.J. admits she finds Brian nice and



pleasant that afternoon when they played football together, which makes her feel torn between this enjoyable side of him she has just met and the rotten side of him she has known from the past.

D.J. is taken aback by Brian's apology for his behavior with her brother two years ago and with her a week ago. She is not used to receiving an apology, and it weighs heavily on her mind all day. She begins thinking about Brian's initial insults to her in far more depth than she ever had before, and it causes a whole new set of insecurities. Now D.J. believes she is a push-over on top of being 'dumb'. She uses the metaphor of a cow to describe herself. "I kept eating, my head down. Mom kept talking but I didn't say anything else because that's what we Schwenks do. If there's a problem or something, instead of solving it or anything, we just stop talking. Just like cows."

D.J.'s age and maturity show through in Chapter 9 in the way she describes her thought process about Brian's apology (and insults), as well as how she over-reacts to her mother bringing up the opportunity to do make-up work for the English class D.J. failed. "Why of all nights did Mom have to bring them up now? Here I was trying to figure out what the whole point of my life was. The last thing I needed was to have to write a stupid paper on Hamlet."



Chapter 10: Wash Day - Chapter 12: The Long Weekend

Chapter 10: Wash Day - Chapter 12: The Long Weekend Summary

Brian arrives for his work on the farm but this time he brings his parents' pressure washer with him; it is meant to help D.J. clean the sides of the barn. He works hard to help get the barn looking better and then enjoys lunch with D.J., her dad, and Curtis. When Brian laughs at D.J.'s old joke about milk, she notes that Curtis looked jealous.

Instead of saying 'thank you' or commenting on how much better the barn looks after being pressure washed, D.J.'s dad simply says it needed paint and tells Brian to do it. The barn is still wet from the pressure wash, so D.J. and Brian decide to go running. D.J. spends a good deal of the run trying to come up with something "cool" to talk about, when Brian surprises her by saying he enjoys running with her and appreciates how "when you don't feel like talking, you don't talk." Brian seems to think D.J. is quite confident and comfortable with herself, even though readers know this is not really the case.

D.J.'s mom sees her running with Brian and asked about that evening, but D.J. plays it off like it isn't a big deal. She claims she is only running with him to be nice while he trains for football. She doesn't want her mom to know she is training him, but also doesn't want to lie to her mom.

Chapter 11 focuses on D.J. and Brian's training together. D.J. trains him using the techniques she observed her older brothers doing, like practicing in the heifer field. She is learning how to coach while Brian is working on improving his game, so in a sense they are both training and exercising new skills. D.J. also exercises the new skill of apologizing after she says something derogatory about Brian's game playing and he begins to leave because he is offended. D.J.'s apology works and Brian stays.

The final day of the week Brian is set to work for the Schwenks as well has have D.J. train him also happens to be D.J.'s 16th birthday. She does not tell Brian and doesn't want him to find out any other way. She acknowledges to that "An awful lot had happened in one week," meaning that she, Brian, and Curtis were getting along and working well together.

Due to rain, D.J. is awarded a reprieve from her farm duties and is free to hang out at Amber's house and act her age. They have a fun time until Amber suggests D.J. apply for a job with her as a checkstand attendant. D.J. thinks those women remind her of cows, just standing around all day waiting to be milked and tells Amber so as her reason for not wanting to do it. Both girls become annoyed at the conversation, and D.J. drives herself home. She knows she doesn't want to be a checkstand clerk, but she can't think



of what she would be good at. She thinks she is only good at farming, which she doesn't want to do for a living and football, which she can't do much with because she is a girl.

D.J. is missing her time with Brian. "There wasn't much that made my brain happier these days. The only time I really enjoyed myself, it seemed, or I was too busy to realize I wasn't enjoying myself, was with Brian." She finally gives up on her regular farm work and decides to prepare the heifer field to be a better practice field. She works all day cutting the grass and marking sprint lines with lime. Even though she doesn't know what she's going to do with the field, it makes her feel better to have created it.

Finally, D.J. can't handle it any more and looks Brian up in the phone book. She is embarrassed and nervous, but she follows through and suggests they keep training together. Brian says he would like to, but he's already gotten a summer job lifeguarding. They have a polite conversation and D.J. is left thinking about it long after they hang up. It's becoming quite evident to readers that she has a crush on Brian.

Chapter 10: Wash Day - Chapter 12: The Long Weekend Analysis

Brian is flabbergasted when he sees Curtis driving his and D.J.'s father to his physical therapy appointment because Curtis is only 13 years old. It is not a big deal for D.J. or her family, as that is the way of life on a farm; you help as soon as you're big enough to - age doesn't matter. Brian's shock accentuates the culture differences between his family and the Schwenks.

Brian using the pressure washer to clean the barn is symbolic of what he is also doing for the Schwenk family. By becoming involved with them, he is unknowingly bringing them back together and helping the family move toward a healthier family environment, like they had in the past. It is foreshadowed that by the end of the story, perhaps the family will shine like it used to - just like the barn does after a good wash.

D.J.'s father's health also seems to coincide with the farm's condition. At the beginning of the book when the farm is in complete disarray, D.J.'s dad's injury is not healing and he doesn't seem interested or motivated to work at healing it. As D.J. and Brian gradually restore the barn to its old condition, D.J.'s father takes more of an interest in doing his physical therapy. He improves from having to use a walker to using a cane.

Even though D.J. is training Brian and appears to be the one in charge and providing the wisdom, she is new to being on the coaching end of things and is learning right alongside Brian - only rather than learning about football and training techniques, she is learning how to coach by communicating effectively. The theme of communication continues throughout the entire novel.

Chapter 11 ends with D.J.'s sweet 16. True to her character, she wants to underplay it and doesn't mention it to Brian, even though it is his last day working on the farm. D.J. tells readers that she had been looking forward to being 16 for so long that at the end of



the day she is disappointed because she doesn't feel any different. Sixteen is often seen as an age milestone, when children start to be looked at as adults; they are on the downside of their teen years, nearing the end of high school, and can legally drive. This reminds readers that D.J. is maturing, as this is her coming-of-age story.

D.J. also has a dream that her dad cooked up a big pot of hay as her family sat around the dinner table - but they were all cows. This is a continuation of the cow motif from earlier in the book.

The scenes and references to D.J.'s father and his cooking are included for humor. The author creates visuals of D.J.'s father's food, as well as the idea of a large football guy getting so excited about cooking dinner. "I looked at him sitting elbow-deep in cookbooks, recipe cards everywhere..."



Chapter 13: Talk - Chapter 15: Epiphany

Chapter 13: Talk - Chapter 15: Epiphany Summary

D.J. is working on accepting that her time with Brian is over and she has to go back to just working on the farm, when she gets a very pleasant surprise - Brian shows up and says he has changed his mind and wants to keep training with her. Brian tries being honest with D.J. and says he doesn't like it when she is passive aggressive with him and he'd like her to knock it off. D.J. is totally confused by this statement, as she doesn't even know what passive-aggressive means. D.J. explains that she is quiet only because she's trying to figure out what to say. She insists she is not smart and can't think of how to word things quickly enough. They figure out that they are just misunderstanding each other, which immediately breaks down more of the wall between them.

Brian inquires to D.J. about why Curtis rarely speaks. He shares that his mother is part of a church group called Talk Back, which helps families communicate. D.J. is very defensive about Curtis and at first thinks Brian is making fun of him or judging her family. However, once Brian explains about his mom's group, D.J. understands but they both just end up making light of it to ease the tension. They later have their most honest conversation yet, admitting things they hadn't wanted the other to know (D.J. admits she failed a class, and Brian admits he is embarrassed that his coach thinks he's lazy).

D.J. is taking her frustrations out on Curtis, blaming him for her situation and feelings. She claims that if Curtis wasn't playing Little League he would be available to help her on the farm, Brian would have never needed to come over and help them, and it would never have been pointed out to D.J. that she lives her life 'like a cow.' While her parents are out of the house watching Curtis play in his State tournament, D.J. stays home alone feeling sorry for herself. She reads through her college prospect letters "just to torture" herself, and goes back through the letters from her English teacher indicating how and why she was failing the class. Knowing that Brian is looking at prospective colleges only makes D.J. depressed that she won't be able to go to college.

After her chores are finished, she drives into town and sees her friends Kari and Amber. D.J. is coming to the realization that she and Amber aren't as close as she thought, as they don't talk about things of depth, like she does with Brian.

By Sunday, D.J. is in a horribly foul mood and finally explodes at her parents after they ask her to take a ten-hour round-trip trip to take Curtis to a Little League awards ceremony. What really tips D.J. over the edge is when her father says she can just get Brian to help him milk, but he gets Brian's name wrong, like usual. After stomping out of the room and driving away to cool off, D.J. admits to readers that what bothers her most about going to the awards ceremony is that it is held near the state college and will just remind her that she is "poor and stupid and ugly and just not cool at all." She puts all evening in the barn, going back inside only after everyone else has gone to bed.



She feels better only after spending time training with Brian the next day. "and it was the strangest thing, but ever time Brian passed me the ball I felt a little better. Like one of those films of the little seed growing out of the ground and its leaves uncurl and then it grows a flower." By the end of her and Brian's session, D.J. is feeling so good about football that she decides to be the first girl to play for her high school football team.

Chapter 13: Talk - Chapter 15: Epiphany Analysis

D.J. and Brian's relationships gradually builds and blossoms into a friendship. They spend every day together working hard on the farm and training for football. D.J.'s character is growing and maturing as she learns to communicate better. She notes that she enjoys her time with Brian primarily because he is easy to talk to - something she has been yearning for.

The author uses irony when Brian explains that his mother is part of a church group that helps families communicate, although she is so involved that she is never home to communicate with her own family.

The theme of communication is prominent in Chapter 14, as Brian and D.J. begin communicating about more personal things, like their family situations. D.J. puts herself out there admitting she has flunked a class, which she had previously thought she didn't want Brian to know. Brian surprises her by being surprised because he thinks she is smart (contrary to what D.J. tells herself) and offers to help her by writing the papers for her so she can have her grade changed to passing. Brian also admits that he is bothered by Jimmy Ott telling everyone Brian is lazy.

D.J. returns to the motif of cows being a metaphor for weak-minded people, when she decides her mother is a cow for not being able to say 'no' to her second job. She also continues referring to herself as a cow, and seems ready to change and start becoming her own person. She just hasn't figured out how yet.

The theme of friendship and communication come together in this section, when D.J. realizes her "best friend" Amber is not someone she can, or does, talk to about anything in-depth. D.J. longs for someone to discuss her feelings and work through her issues with, but Amber does not provide that for her. The only person D.J. has found who she can open up to in the way she wants to is Brian.

The different aspects of D.J.'s life that make her unhappy are culminating and becoming the motivation she needs to make a major change. She is finally so sick of being down about everything that she finds the courage to make a decision she's always been afraid to make and assumed she could not make. She decides she will play for the high school football team. This decision shows tremendous growth in D.J.'s character; she is becoming more comfortable with herself and confident in her abilities - as least as an athlete.



Chapter 15: Heifers Don't Play Football - Chapter 17: Family Secrets

Chapter 15: Heifers Don't Play Football - Chapter 17: Family Secrets Summary

D.J. is excited about her decision to try out for the Red Bend football team and seems quite confident that she will be a valuable asset to the team. She's been self-conscious about her size as a larger girl up until this point, but now she sees it as a benefit to her desired position on the football team - running back. D.J. decides to keep her decision to herself, not even telling her new confidant Brian.

When D.J. asks Brian what his mother thinks is 'wrong' with Curtis, Brian explains that she just finds it 'interesting' that he doesn't talk much because "a lot of times in families people don't talk because they're afraid to." This resonates with D.J. She opens up to readers about Curtis, supplying new background information that adds depth to his character. Curtis has been sleeping over at friends' houses a lot lately, which D.J. deduces is to avoid the family. He also collects animal skulls that he finds and cleans up. She finds his room deplorable and compares it to her older brothers', Win and Bill, room, which she also doesn't like because it's too clean and looks more like "a model of a bedroom" and doesn't feel lived in at all. "It felt like a room for people who were never coming home."

D.J. begins worrying what people will think and say when it comes out that she's trying out for the football team. Primarily, she worries about what her dad will think. D.J. thinks her dad will make fun of her and she is dreading him finding out. She has fully dedicated herself to the decision, however, and despite her fears of being judged by others, she is excited to be a football player and is going to follow through.

Now that D.J. has found a way to feel more confident, she is also able to talk with more ease. She is no longer afraid to open up to Brian and they talk about his family for the first time. Brian admits that his parents don't really get along and don't seem to have much to say to one another. Brian shares that he doesn't like how his dad always tells him he's perfect and doing everything right - even if he's not, and he would rather have a dad like D.J.'s who criticizes and offers suggestions on how to improve. D.J. doesn't like that her dad does that, however, as she has been waiting for a compliment from him for quite awhile now. D.J. then opened up about why her family doesn't speak to her older brothers anymore; she said they got into a fight with her father and haven't spoken since. When Brian asks what the fight was about, D.J. explained that her father had made a comment about Win needing to work harder at football and Win rebutted saying his father should work harder at farming. Their father said the farm was for them some day, but Win said he didn't want it. The fight ended with Win packing his bags and leaving with Bill deciding to join him. D.J. blames her father for her brothers leaving and never talking to them again.



Brian and D.J. continue opening up to each other and ultimately learn a lot about themselves and ways in which they can improve.

Chapter 15: Heifers Don't Play Football - Chapter 17: Family Secrets Analysis

D.J.'s tone changes for the first time in the book from self-depriving to confident. When she talks about football, the excitement and passion in her voice is audible. She also states that making the football team would mean she "wasn't a cow," meaning, she did what she wanted to do for once - she is doing something for herself to make herself happy. D.J. even admits that her older brothers were cows for playing football, just as everyone always expected them to since they were little. For the first time in the book, D.J. realizes she can be great like her brothers - or perhaps even better - by taking a leap of faith with her hobby and passion.

The author uses many similes throughout the novel. One example for Chapter 16 is when D.J. says, "But I just had this immediate feeling that filled me up like milk pouring into a pitcher until you can see it right there at the rim almost bubbling out." Another example from Chapter 16 is, "For the rest of the day my mind was going a million miles a minute...like I was in a room full of presents and I didn't know which one to open first."

The background information provided about Curtis reveals a lot. The fact that he collects skulls - but only if they include the jaw bone - is symbolic of his voluntary silence. A jaw bone is needed to speak, even though the skulls are from dead animals who will not be speaking. This reflects how Curtis also has a jaw bone but does not speak.

D.J. and Brian's relationship grows closer when they open up about their families while painting the barn one day. Brian longs for a better relationship with his father, just like D.J. does. Although D.J. just wants to hear her father say he appreciates her and thinks she works hard, Brian would like to hear his father offer him advice on how to improve - or somehow show that he cares enough to want to help and work with Brian. D.J. also shares that her family fights about 'little things', but she hasn't realized yet that the fights are not really about the 'little things' that finally set them off; rather, the fights are from all the built up frustrations and resentments because her family never openly communicates about things.

Through her conversation with Brian about families, readers learn that D.J. is holding on to a lot of resentment. She resents her father for 'making' her brothers leave, and she resents her older brothers for unfairly asking her 'which side' she was one in the fight, when she felt she had to say her dad's since she still lived in the house.

Brian and D.J. are helping each other realize some important flaws about themselves. D.J. realizes that her father may put so much pressure on his kids because he flunked out of college, while Brian realizes he tends to blame everyone but himself for mistakes on the football field, because that is what his father taught him to do.



Chapter 18: D.J. Goes to Town - Chapter 20: The Most Disgusting Thing I've Ever Heard Of

Chapter 18: D.J. Goes to Town - Chapter 20: The Most Disgusting Thing I've Ever Heard Of Summary

D.J. hunts down the Red Bend football coach, Jeff Peterson, at his second job at Home Depot to say she wants to play football for him. She is prepared for just about anything except his actual response, which is simply asking about her grades. He knows she failed a class last year and says she will need to find a way to fix that before she can play. D.J. lies and says she is already working on it with Mrs. Stolze, the English teacher. The coach says he will ask around about the rules, but he figures she can probably play.

D.J. admits to readers what Brian had suggested in the previous chapter - perhaps she let her grade slip and didn't care because that is what her father did in college. Acknowledging this continues to help D.J.'s character grow.

D.J. goes to see her mom at work as the elementary principal to talk about her English grade, and her mom is clearly surprised to see her. D.J. spots a new picture of her older brother Bill and a man she doesn't recognize. When she inquires about it, her mom says the man is Bill's college roommate and Bill had emailed her the picture. D.J. is very surprised to learn her mother is still communicating with Bill, but doesn't press the subject more because she wants to discuss her English grade.

Ultimately, D.J. goes to Mrs. Stolze's house to discuss what she can do to turn her English grade around. The football coach, Jeff, has already called her and explained the situation, and she is very excited about the whole idea when D.J. arrives. D.J. mentions to readers how little Mrs. Stolze actually knows about football, but it is still nice of her to be so excited. They work out a rigorous schedule for D.J. to follow throughout the summer to improve her failing grade.

D.J. says her relationship with Brian is becoming 'different.' Although she insists that they don't flirt, she seems to be suggesting there may be some attraction. D.J. is also teasing readers a bit with quotes like, "And then, because it was just such a perfect moment, the light hitting Brian's face and his hair that's so shiny even though it's short, and the barn so pretty in the sunshine, I couldn't help it. I sprayed him full in the face with my water." They get into a water fight and seem bound to end up kissing, but Amber pulls up and ruins the moment. Brian leaves quickly.

Amber is very rude and confrontational with D.J. about what she saw, meanly saying that 'guys like Brian don't date girls like D.J.' She continues pushing D.J.'s buttons until



D.J. snaps and tells her to "go to hell." Amber backs off and tries to get D.J. to go to a movie with her, bribing her with beer, but D.J. refuses to hang out. She is very angry. She tells readers that Amber doesn't know anything about boys because she's never had a boyfriend.

D.J. finally admits to readers that she 'likes' Brian. However, Amber's comments have gotten to her, and she believes he would never fall for a girl like her. D.J. believes she doesn't deserve someone like Brian.

While trying to work through her newly-admitted feelings, D.J. accepts an invitation from Kari to a party. Although she ends up in her normal clothes and hairstyle, the fact that she thought about them and mentions looking 'un-sexy' shows how D.J.'s priorities are changing and she is beginning to care more about her physical appearance - now that she wants to be attractive to Brian. The party ends up being a kegger, which is not a typical activity for D.J. The fact that she mentions Brian is not there suggests that she attended because she had hoped he would be there.

D.J. ends up admitting to Amber and Kari that she plans to try out for the football team. She is pleasantly surprised that Kari is supportive and says that if D.J. 'has the guts to try out for the football team' then she will try out for cheerleading. Amber, however, is not supportive at all. She accuses D.J. of trying out just so she can "be around all those guys" and then calls the idea "stupid and pathetic" before walking away. D.J. finds Amber later waiting on the hood of her car. Amber is clearly upset and says enough for D.J. to finally understand that Amber is a lesbian, is in love with D.J., and thought they were in some sort of relationship. D.J. is shocked, but feels horrible for not figuring it out and for inadvertently hurting Amber.

Chapter 18: D.J. Goes to Town - Chapter 20: The Most Disgusting Thing I've Ever Heard Of Analysis

D.J. has found the motivation she needs to work as hard at school as she does on the farm and in training for sports. She is using this motivation - and her newfound confidence to get her life straightened out. She is beginning to realize she can be as talented as her brothers and can be just as successful - if not more so.

The scene where D.J. visits her mom at work is revealing. First, it shows that family means a great deal to her mother, as she has surrounded herself with photos of her family even if they are older photos and not everyone looks their best. She also has a current picture of her son Bill, whom D.J. has been telling readers the whole novel doesn't talk to the family. Later, when D.J. reflects on it, she said she feels as though she found her mother cheating. All this time, D.J. has been missing her brothers terribly and wishing she could talk with them, so she is very hurt to learn that her mother is still in contact with at least Bill but hasn't been sharing that information. This is an added complication from D.J.'s family's lack of communication. It also creates feelings of betrayal for D.J. She comments that her mother's office feels more like a home than



their house does, and she spends more time there as well. "It occurred to me, pulling into our driveway, that I wasn't the only person in our family keeping secrets."

There have been many suggestions in the novel up to this point that Amber may be a lesbian and be attracted to D.J. Amber seems fascinated with other people's relationships yet she doesn't engage in any of her own. She is clearly jealous to have found D.J. flirting with Brian and often wants to hang out with D.J. alone, usually with alcohol. D.J. also mentioned earlier in the novel that Amber sometimes likes to talk about who is gay in their town and makes fun of them; it is most like a defense mechanism. Amber finally admits to D.J. at a kegger that she is in love with her and thought they were in some sort of relationship with one another. D.J. is legitimately shocked and feels simultaneously horrible for hurting Amber so bad and like a "moron" for not realizing it earlier.

D.J. explains to readers her thoughts on Amber being gay and is clearly accepting of it. Although she is "weirded-out" thinking back on all their time together and how she somehow missed all of the clues, it doesn't bother her that Amber likes women in general. D.J. is as logical about homosexuality as she is about most things, saying she thinks the stereotype of gay men being into fashion and hair styling makes little sense because those are activities that would lead the gay men to more women and not men.



Chapter 21: Whoever Said Love Was Fun? - Chapter 23: Mom

Chapter 21: Whoever Said Love Was Fun? - Chapter 23: Mom Summary

Brian tells D.J. that he and his girlfriend broke up. For a fleeting moment, D.J. hopes it was because of the water fight she'd had with Brian, but then she immediately tells herself it could NEVER be about her. A few days later, she and Brian are doing sit-ups together for training and her dad barges in angry. He had heard them huffing and puffing and assumed they were fooling around. Everyone is then embarrassed.

D.J. has to go to the supermarket that Amber works at in order to pick up groceries for her dad, but Amber pretends not to see her and then goes on break before D.J. checks out so they don't have to talk. D.J. was nervous about speaking with Amber, but she had planned to. She is relieved that Amber avoided her.

D.J. and Brian finally have their first kiss, but D.J. says it is "horrible" because she has her eyes closed and doesn't see it coming. She is so surprised by it that she jolts her head up and hits Brian in the nose, causing it to bleed. She is extremely embarrassed and apologizes for the rest of the day. Brian is not mad and says he was still looking forward to their last workout on Friday, when D.J. returns from her trip to Madison to take Curtis to his awards ceremony.

D.J. drives Curtis five hours to his charity game and awards banquet. While Curtis is playing his game, D.J. goes to a coffee shop and asks a girl with cute hair where she got it cut (a tip Amber had taught her). D.J. goes to the recommended salon and gets her hair cut short so it will fit into the football helmet. She loves having her hair styled and even admits to readers she thinks it makes her look good. She is pleased and excited when a cute guy flirts with her in the salon.

On their drive home from Madison, Curtis asks D.J. why she cut her hair and she decides to tell him the truth about trying out for the football team. It then occurs to her that "maybe Curtis had the same sort of really complicated feelings about football that I had." She tells Curtis he doesn't have to play. When he seems curious about her statement, she encourages him to share what he really wants to be doing.

Uncharacteristically, Curtis opens up enough to tell the truth. He wants to be a dentist. D.J. doesn't realize soon enough that he is serious, so she responds with a laugh, which shuts Curtis back down.

D.J.'s mom comes to talk with her first thing in the morning because Jeff Peterson had told the PTA that D.J. wants to try out for the football team. D.J.'s mom thinks D.J. is trying out to prove something to her family. She wants to assure D.J. that they really do appreciate all the hard work she's been doing on the farm the past six months and she



doesn't need to prove herself any further by trying out for football. This makes D.J. feel bad, as she hadn't intended to embarrass her mother (by having her find out about the football from someone else - and in front of a crowd) or worry her.

D.J. and her mom open up and have a real conversation for once. Her mom admits that she had agreed to work two jobs because there 'wasn't much for her at home'. She also shares that she has been offered the principal job full-time. She seems to be looking for D.J.'s approval, and when she gets it, she is relieved and happy. She also gives her blessing to D.J. to try out for football.

Chapter 21: Whoever Said Love Was Fun? - Chapter 23: Mom Analysis

D.J. has many relationships (her dad, mom, Curtis, Brian, and Amber) changing and reaching climaxes by Chapter 21.

The sexual tension is building between D.J. and Brian, and their conversations seem to be turning more sexual in nature. After D.J.'s dad bursts in on them doing sit-ups in the barn (assuming they had been fooling around), D.J. tells Brian about a time her dad caught her brother in the barn when a girl. The tension does finally culminate into a kiss, but the moment turns humorous when D.J. is so surprised to be kissed that she moves her head up too abruptly and gives Brian a nosebleed. The scene reminds readers that D.J. and Brian are teenagers still coming into their own and are new to situations like kissing.

D.J. moves way out of her comfort zone in Madison when she approaches a stranger to ask where she got her hair cut and then again when she goes to the salon to get a new shorter hairstyle. This demonstrates D.J.'s growing confidence, as she never would have done either of those things at the beginning of the book.

D.J. also tries out some of the communication skills Brian had shared with her in their conversations painting the barn on her drive with Curtis. She remembers Brian suggesting that Curtis may be afraid to talk, so she tries to put herself in his position. She gets through to him by saying he doesn't have to play football just because all of his siblings do, and then encourages him to share what he really wants to do. Curtis admits he wants to be a dentist, which makes sense of his skull collection - he is studying the animals' teeth. D.J. is caught off guard and laughs, which angers Curtis and makes him put his wall right back up. D.J. ends up apologizing, which is a very new skill for her. It works. Curtis opens up and talks more on the rest of that car trip than he has the entire novel.

D.J. and her mom also have a breakthrough in their relationship by communicating with one another. D.J.'s growing maturity helps her consider her mom's point of view and feelings about the family and her relationships with each of her children. Thinking like this leads D.J. to understanding her mom better and having a real, healthy conversation.



Chapter 24: Welcome to Schwenksville - Chapter 26: Dog Days

Chapter 24: Welcome to Schwenksville - Chapter 26: Dog Days Summary

D.J. has her heart set on impressing Brian with her new haircut and news of trying out for football when they get together for their final training session on Friday, but he calls and says he is going with his parents to a lake cabin for the weekend instead. He invites D.J., but she can't go because of her responsibilities on the farm. It breaks D.J.'s heart but she reverts to her old ways and acts like it's not a big deal.

Her dad's hip has healed enough by now that he can drive a tractor again, so he mows and bales while D.J. and Curtis move the hay. The only thing that makes it all bearable for D.J. is her newfound relationship with Curtis, as they occasionally catch each other's eye and smile, which she likes.

D.J.'s mom takes her shopping for school clothes on Sunday, and D.J. appreciates how her mom buys her clothes for football training without saying anything about it. She also appreciates not being asked about Brian. D.J. knows her mom wants to talk about both subjects but is holding back until D.J. brings them up. "Her job is to keep the peace, make sure everyone is doing okay, and not say too much about it. And you know, my mom might not be the most perfect mother in the whole world, but on that score, at least, at keeping quiet about awkward subjects, she's pretty great." D.J. is so appreciative that she drops her defensiveness and opens up to her mom all on her own. They don't talk about Brian though - they talk about her mom's new job as principal.

When Brian hasn't called D.J. by Sunday evening, as he had promised to do, she becomes worried and anxious and finally calls him. He answers in a great mood, but D.J. can hear people and music in the background, as well as a female voice repeatedly asking who he is talking to. Brian sounds happy to talk with her and says he will stop by the farm tomorrow to see her. D.J. wants to tell him about trying out for football tomorrow but doesn't get the chance. When D.J. later reflects on the conversation, she is pleased to realize Brian was ignoring the female voice to talk to her and seemed far more interested in his conversation with D.J. She admits to herself that she may have been the reason Brian sounded happy. Still afraid to consider herself a possibility as Brian's girlfriend - especially since they will be playing for opposing teams - she hopes that they will end up good friends.

D.J. shows up for football practice tryouts and sits in her truck, avoiding going to the field. She is extremely grateful when Kari and her brother Kyle, the team captain, show up and walk with her to the field. Kari is doing good on her promise to try out for the cheerleading squad in support of D.J. trying out for football. D.J. does very well in try-



outs, actually beating most of the guys in the sprints and catching all of the passes given to her.

Coach Peterson gathers everyone together after the try-out and asks them all to vote on paper whether D.J. should be allowed to play on the team. Jeff says something like that could divide the team unless they are all okay with it. He also asks everyone to write down "why" along with their response. D.J. writes "Yes, because she knows the game and has a good attitude." They scrimmage after that, and by the end of the day, many of the guys seem to have accepted D.J. She is able to tackle Beamer, the fastest guy on the team, and even Beamer thinks she'll make a great linebacker. As they walk to their cars after practice, some Hawley guys are there to heckle them. When the Hawley guys notice D.J., they laugh and make fun of them all for having a girl on their team. Beamer defends her, saying she will be able to bring Hawley's quarterback down, which of course, is Brian. Then D.J. notices that Brian is with the Hawley guys and he is shocked to see her and learn she is on the team. D.J. describes his look as though she slapped him.

The next day, D.J.'s dad finally finds out about her trying out for football and confronts her about it in the barn while she is doing her morning milking. He simply asks her if it is true. D.J. nods for an answer and waits for her dad to lecture her or shoot down the idea. She is shocked when all he does is tell her to clean the gutters and walks away.

D.J. and her father stop speaking to one another after that, and she says she is now in the same 'club' as her older brothers. She is angry at her father for reacting that way, which is why she opts to ignore him back. Her dad's hip continues to improve, however, and he is gradually taking over the farm duties again.

Brian also abruptly stops talking to D.J., which greatly upsets her. She tries several times to call him in order to explain further about football, but he won't answer his cell phone. When she finally calls his house, his mom lies and says he is not home. She finally decides to stop by his house so he will have to talk with her. They meet in the street, in their cars pointed opposite directions, and talk with the windows rolled down. Brian is furious at D.J. for not telling him about her intentions of trying out for football after they had spent so much time together. He says she broke his trust and he feels used. He drives off before she can think of anything to say in return. Going over the conversation later in her head, D.J. understands that she lied to him - even though she didn't mean to - and can empathize why he is so mad.

Despite all the drama in her relationships with Brian, her dad, and Amber, D.J. continues doing football and working hard on her make-up English work. She is pleasantly surprised one evening when Curtis stops by her room and asks if she is okay. When D.J. says 'no', Curtis asks if she likes Brian. She is honest and says 'yes.' Curtis simply says he is sorry, but it means a lot to D.J.; she knows how much courage it took him to come and say that to her.



Chapter 24: Welcome to Schwenksville - Chapter 26: Dog Days Analysis

D.J. continues thinking about Amber, knowing she will eventually need to talk to her about everything. She is still avoiding it for now, however.

Communication with her mother continues opening up. D.J. recognizes that her mother's adopted role in the family is the peace keeper, which she does by not bringing up awkward subjects. Knowing how the family reacts to awkward subjects by shutting down, D.J.'s mother opts to never bring them up in hopes of maintaining a relationship with everyone. Although the lack of communication is not entirely healthy, her desire to maintain a relationship with each of her family members is very motherly and demonstrates her love for her family. D.J. also notes that her mother is sad D.J. still hasn't shared with her dad about trying out for the football team. That relationship has not yet been repaired.

D.J. overcomes her nerves about trying out for the team and does great. She beats most of the guys at everything and gradually earns respect from most of them throughout the day. Most importantly, she earns the support of the team captain, Kyle, and the fastest guy on the team, Beaner. The boys' acceptance of her is undeniable when they - especially Beaner - proudly claim her as one of their own in front of the Hawley guys and say she will bring their quarterback down that season. When D.J. realizes Brian is with the Hawley guys and has just found out that she is on the team, she has to contend with the fact that she not only shocked him, but likely hurt his feelings and probably offended him.

D.J.'s father's reaction to finding out she tried out for football is the most painful outcome possible for D.J. Although she has dreaded her father finding out, somewhere deep down, she wanted to get a reaction from him out of it - preferably, to make him proud by playing football as well as her brothers.

By making such an effort to get Brian to speak with her again, D.J. shows how much his friendship means to her. She also demonstrates a growing maturity by listening to what he has to say and considering things from his point of view, which led to her to understand his anger and even agree with it.

Curtis' character continues showing growth in Chapter 26 when he takes the initiative to check on D.J. and initiate a conversation. D.J. understands how hard it is for Curtis to do things like that, so the efforts means a great deal to her. Their relationship continues developing, and they are becoming a refuge for one another - someone to go to who understands where they are coming from.



Chapter 27: Making the Team - Chapter 29: That's My Ball

Chapter 27: Making the Team - Chapter 29: That's My Ball Summary

D.J. overhears her coach telling Justin Hunsberger that he was the only starter who had voted against D.J. joining the team, so he needs to get a better attitude or get a new team. It makes D.J. very happy to hear the boys aren't completely against her being there. She admits the practices are hard, but she feels obligated to be the hardest working teammate out there due to the expectations people hold for her due to her last name. She is slightly embarrassed that a big deal is made out of her having to change in the girls' locker room instead of with the guys, but the cheerleaders are excited about it and pump her for information about playing football with the boys.

D.J. talks with her coach about not wanting to play linebacker in the big game that Friday. She doesn't tell him why, but it is because she doesn't want to play directly against Brian. Jeff matter-of-factly asks, "What makes you think you're playing?" This reminds D.J. that although she is working hard, playing time will not just be handed to her because he is 'special' as the only girl on the team or because of her last name. Jeff asks how her English make-up work is coming along, reminding her that her grade must come first. D.J. is quickly humbled and embarrassed about assuming she would be playing.

Mrs. Stolze reviews the work D.J. has done so far on her English papers and gives her approval for D.J. to play on Friday.

D.J. finally can't stand the silence of her family any more, so she breaks their dinner silence with the news that she will be playing linebacker. When her father doesn't say anything, D.J. waits until she is finished eating and asks, "Are you going to tell me to clear out too?" She says that intentionally to hurt him, as that is the last thing he told her older brother before he moved out and stopped talking to the family.

While still at the height of her anger, D.J. calls Brian and leaves a message for her brother, Bill. It is a short and awkward message just saying hi and that she is playing football. She simultaneously wishes she could erase it but it also glad she did it.

D.J.'s actions finally get through to her father. She is shocked to see him at one of her practices a few days later watching her run plays. She takes her time cleaning up after practice, avoiding the inevitable confrontation with her father. He takes her by surprise, however, by telling Kyle that D.J. looks okay and is "something to be proud of" while D.J. is in earshot. As they walk toward the car together, the words just seem to come and the barriers fall down. Her father says he took care of the cows that afternoon and found the football field she had constructed up there to practice on with Brian. He



compliments her on it and admits it makes him wish he'd stayed in coaching. D.J. suggests he become the assistant coach. When her dad says he's not good at anything other than farming, D.J. compliments his cooking. It is obvious this means a lot to her dad. He returns the compliment with kind words about her haircut. By the time they reach the car, her dad has his arm around her.

Although D.J. had been told she was on J.V., the night before the game Jeff calls and tells her she will be "going out with the team" on Friday. When she shows up before the game, however, she is confronted with the news that Brian's father is suing the school, claiming D.J. is ineligible to play on the team.

D.J. watches most of the game from the sidelines. Red Bend is losing at half time and Brian is playing excellently. At half time, a Hawley player squeezes D.J.'s butt and calls her a "dyke." The interaction, plus seeing Brian with his arm around a cheerleader, fuels D.J. with anger. "It was like all the things that I should have been mad about for weeks and weeks just built up inside me until I ended up one huge volcano of angry D.J."

D.J. channels her anger while in the locker room and tells her coach she "needs" to play.

Jeff puts D.J. in the game and she ends up intercepting the pass from Brian and making a touchdown. Her teammates and the crowd go wild cheering for her, and she sees both of her parents and her oldest brother Bill in the stands. When D.J. lines up for the next play, she hears Brian yelling at his teammates in a negative way, which makes her mad. Unfortunately - and ironically - she mutters a negative statement in response and Justin Hunsberger hears her. He takes her 'lead' and starts trash talking Brian. Soon, the entire Red Bend team is trash talking Brian. The game continues very intensely until Red Bend finally wins with a score of 14-10. She and Brian make eye contact when the teams congratulate one another, and she believes they will never talk again.

After the game, D.J. sees that Amber had come to watch her. She's also died her hair brown. Still riding on confidence from the game, D.J. approaches her and initiates conversation. Amber has a friend from work, who it is hinted may be a girlfriend, and the three of them have a friendly conversation, agreeing to hang out in the future. D.J. determines that Amber seems happy, which she's never seen before.

Chapter 27: Making the Team - Chapter 29: That's My Ball Analysis

D.J. makes a conscious effort to break through her family's wall of silence. She stands up to her father at dinner by announcing her position at football when she knew everyone expected to just eat in silence. She pushed the boundaries by asking her father if he was going to ask her to leave.

Using her anger with her father to fuel her courage, D.J. decides to reach out to her older brother Bill. This is a huge step for D.J. She is choosing not to follow the traditional



path of her family and is instead deciding to communicate. She is reaching out to her older brother, trying to re-establish a relationship.

D.J. standing up to her father seems to be the motivation he needed to reflect on his actions and prepare to make some changes. He shows up to watch her practice, which is his way of reaching out to her and showing some support. This is close to an apology and is a big step coming from him. He takes it a step further and compliments D.J.'s playing while she is earshot and even says she is "something to be proud of." Those are the words D.J. has been waiting the whole novel to hear, and the effort from her father makes her relax her defensive front. Their exchange on the way from the locker room to the car is significant, as it is the first time they have clearly communicated in a positive manner the entire book. They both hear what they have been wanting - needing - to hear.

D.J. unravels at the Friday football game against Hawley. She watches from the sidelines while her team loses the first half, but after a Hawley player squeezes her but and calls her a name at half time, and she sees Brian flirting with a cheerleader, her anger comes spewing forward. She is furious about how the situation with Brian has turned out.

Channeling her emotions (mostly anger) onto the football field, D.J. manages to read Brian's body language - which she learned from all their practice together throughout the summer - and intercept his pass. She takes off with the ball and ultimately makes a touchdown. She is thrilled about that, but when she spots her oldest brother Bill - her hero - alongside her parents in the stands, she explodes with pride. She looks up to Bill, and having him witness her proudest moment to date means the world to her.

When D.J.'s mutters "Where's your father now, Brian," in the heat of her anger on the field and it is picked up on by her team who immediately join in on the trash talk, it is evident how much leadership and influence D.J. has over the team. Without realizing it, she had been leading them by example - even when her example is bad. This is also an example of irony, as the whole reason D.J. originally hated Brian was because he had trashed talked her brother, essentially kicking him when he was already down. D.J. just did the same thing to Brian.

D.J. notes that when she and Brian made eye contact after the game, "of everything that's happened to me this crazy, stupid summer, in that one second that we looked at each other, that's when I felt I grew up the most."

After the game, D.J. is completely drained and needs to go home and rest. She even resorts to calling her mother "mommy," which only indicates how completely exhausted she must be. She does note how good it is to see her brother and Dad talking again, as well as how nice it is when Bil's roommate calls her good looking. D.J.'s confidence is at an all-time high in the novel, as she has managed to repair all of the relationships in her life - except Brian.

Chapter 30: Brian Nelson - Chapter 32:

Chapter 30: Brian Nelson - Chapter 32: Summary

D.J. wakes up the morning after the game to Brian Nelson in her driveway. She is excited and nervous to see him, offering up an apology right away, which is very uncharacteristic of her. Brian basically ignores her apology, and says he is there only because Jimmy Ott ordered him to come and thank D.J. for the game. The mood eventually lightens a bit, and D.J. invites Brian to go for a walk with her. "It occurred to me that I should say something. I'd spent a lot of time this summer learning how to talk, for the first time really, and now was the time for me to put it to good use." She gathers her newfound courage and confidence and admits she misses Brian. This leads to him sharing that he had had a girlfriend named Kris, who he broke up with over D.J. He then asks her if she ever considered dating a football player, and D.J. realizes that he means him.

They are interrupted by D.J.'s mom jogging by. She is using her extra time from only have one job now to get into shape. D.J. is proud of her.

D.J. walks Brian to his car and he kisses her forehead. They are back on good terms.

D.J. is writing this story as her make-up English assignment.

Chapter 30: Brian Nelson - Chapter 32: Analysis

D.J. and Brian end up using their newfound communication skills that they developed over the summer to patch their relationship back together. Brian is brave to come to D.J.'s house, and D.J. shows how much she's matured by apologizing first and admitting she misses Brian. The communication and honest work and they end up talking about dating openly for the first time. By the time Brian leaves, their relationship has changed and become more than friends.



Characters

D.J. Schwenk

D.J. is the protagonist of the novel. She is a high school sophomore with three brothers. She loves football and is the first girl in her high school to try out for the football team. She also falls in love with Brian Nelson, although it takes her most of the book to admit it.

Dad

D.J.'s father is a long-time farmer who hurt his hip using the manure spreader and has to use a walker. He makes the family meals and gradually becomes better at cooking throughout the novel. He is also very stubborn and chooses to remain silent and not deal with things when he gets upset or hurt.

Curtis

Curtis is the narrator's very quiet younger brother who is an excellent baseball player. He is the character foil to D.J. It is eventually revealed that he wants to be a dentist.

Mom

The narrator's mother is a sixth grade teacher who also works a second job as an elementary school principal. She secretly keeps in contact with her oldest sons who no longer speak with the rest of the family.

Brian Nelson

Brian Nelson is Hawley's team captain and backup quarterback. He is good looking, wealthy, and a good student. D.J. ends up training him throughout the summer, and they gradually go from hating one another, to being friends, to having a crush on each other.

Win Schwenk

Win is D.J.'s oldest brother who no longer lives at home and doesn't speak with the family. Win is about 20 years old and was a great football player in high school. When his older brother Bill had a falling out with their father, Win decided to leave home with Bill in support.



Bill Schwenk

Bill is one of D.J.'s older brothers who is away at college and does not communicate with the family. He has a huge argument with his father and decided to move out and cut off communication. His brother Win came with him.

Amber Schneider

D.J. describes Amber, her best friend at the beginning of the novel, as 'tough' and able to intimidate others. Amber dyes her hair and consistently puts others down. It is eventually revealed that she does these things as a defense mechanism, because she is a lesbian and has a crush on D.J., but isn't ready to admit it aloud for fear of rejection.

Grandpa Warren

Grandpa Warren was the original owner of the Schwenk family farm. He kept impeccable care of the farm, but it's gone downhill since he passed away.

Jimmy Ott

Jimmy Ott has been the Hawley football coach for 29 years. He sent Brian Nelson over to work on Schwenk Farm in order to earn the right to be a starter in football. He is described as short with red cheeks and a small belly. He is close friend with the Schwenk family.

Kari Jorgensen

Kari Jorgensen is a senior at D.J.'s high school who D.J. is friends with through Amber. Kari works at the local ice cream parlor and ends up being a good and supportive friend to D.J. Kari tries out for the cheerleading squad in support of D.J. trying out for the football team.

Mary Stolze

Mary Stolze is the English teacher whose class D.J. flunked.

Beaner Halstaad

Beaner is very thin and is the fastest boy in Red Bend high school. He plays receiver on the football team. He is one of the first players on the Red Bend football team to be supportive of D.J. joining them.



Jeff Peterson

Jeff Peterson is the Red Bend football coach. He has a second job at Home Depot.

Kyle Jorgenson

Kyle is the Red Bend football team captain. His sister is D.J.'s friend Kari.

Justin Hunsberger

Justin is the only Red Bend football player who voted against having D.J. on the team. Jeff Peterson meets with him and tells him to either get a new attitude or a new team.

Joe Namath

Joe Namath is an 11-year-old cow named after a football player. He is D.J.'s favorite cow and is taken away at the beginning of the novel to be killed.

Smut

Smut is a dog that previously belonged to D.J.'s older brother, but now belongs to her. Smut carries a football around and loves to play fetch with it.



Objects/Places

Schwenk Farm

Schwenk Farm is the narrator's family farm, which has 32 cows. The narrator describes it as having used to be pristine and very well kept, but these days it looks "junky" because they don't have time to clean it like her grandfather did.

Red Bend

Red Bend is the town where the narrator lives. It is also the name of the narrator's school.

Hawley

Hawley is the neighboring and rivaling town to Red Bend. It also has a school with nearly twice as many kids as Red Bend.

Wisconsin

This is the state that the narrator's family dairy farm is in.

Manure Spreader

D.J.'s father injured his hip using this machine and, as a result, could no longer do the bulk of the farm work, so D.J. had to take over.

Football

Football is the common thread throughout the Schwenk family. It is a sport all of the family members are involved with in some way, and all of the Schwenk kids show talent in.

English

D.J. fails this subject in school due to her increased responsibilities on the farm taking up so much of her time. She has to find a way to make-up her missing work of English if she wants to play on the football team.



Cherokee

Brian Nelson drives a Cherokee.

Barn

The Barn is the center of the farm and holds symbolism in the novel. It is where the cows are milked - the substance of the family - and it where D.J. and Brian's relationship begins and blossoms.

Madison

Madison is a town several hours away from Red Bend. It is where Curtis receives an award and where D.J. cuts her hair short.

College

D.J. makes several comments throughout the novel about not being able to go to college because her family can't afford it. However, both of her older brothers are in college on full ride athletic scholarships. Additionally, a point of contention between D.J. and Brian is that Brian is looking a colleges to attend next year.



Themes

Communication

One of the main themes in Dairy Queen is communication. D.J. comes from a family where there is an extreme lack of communication, which has led to break-downs in multiple relationships within the family. The Schwenk family does not talk about feelings, so when their feelings are hurt they keep the emotions inside rather than talk about it. This leads to resentment building until someone can't handle it anymore, and a huge fight ensues. One of these fights occurred between D.J.'s father and D.J.'s oldest brother Bill. In the heat of the argument, Bill packed his bags and left, with their brother Wes following in support. Seven months have already passed at the beginning of the book and Bill and Wes are still not speaking with the rest of the family.

D.J.'s younger brother Curtis has taken a different route. He is too young to just walk out and be on his own, so he chooses not to talk at all. Eventually, the other family members give up, rarely address him, and stop expecting him to respond. This alienates Curtis from the family and encourages the behavior to continue. Brian eventually suggested that perhaps Curtis doesn't talk because he is afraid to. This gets D.J. thinking and she eventually agrees. Once she understands this, however, she is able to break through his barrier and get him to open up to her.

The communication theme also appears in D.J. and Brian's relationship. D.J. comes from a family with very open communication, so talking about feelings comes naturally to him. Throughout the summer, he gradually encourages D.J. to open up, and she learns to communicate better with those she loves. D.J. passes this skill on to her family one by one and by opening up the communication channels the relationships begin to mend.

Competition

The common thread in the The Schwenk family is competition. All four of the Schwenk children excel at sports and are taught from a very young age how to compete. D.J. proudly brags to Brian and her readers about how hard her older brothers worked as the high school football captains. She considers them true competitors. D.J. doesn't realize for a good portion of the book that she works just as hard - if not harder - than they did. This is eventually pointed out to her by multiple other characters.

Competition is also what brings D.J. and Brian together and, ironically, what puts a rift between them. When the book opens, D.J. and Brian absolutely detest one another and want nothing to do with each other. Brian shows up to work on the Schwenk farm only because his football coach orders him to in order to be a starter. His first few days working on the farm are made even less enjoyable due to D.J. and Curtis' competitive



spirit. They do not like Brian, so they refuse to show any weakness around him and definitely wear themselves out physically in the process.

After D.J. begins training Brian, she joins in on most of the activity simply because she is competitive. It leads to be them both getting into impecable shape by the time football tryouts come around, and it shows D.J. what a great athlete she really is. It lends to her growing confidence, giving her the courage to try out for the football team.

Coming of Age

Dairy Queen is a coming of age novel. At the beginning of the book, D.J. does not know who she is or wants to be. She is filled with anger and resentment and her self-confidence is low. She is angry with her father for not doing all he can to heal, therefore making her responsible for the upkeep of the entire farm; she is angry with her mother for working two jobs and never being home; and she misses her brothers terribly but is too stubborn to do anything about it. D.J. also thinks of herself as "dumb" because she failed sophomore English and unattractive because she doesn't have a boyfriend. She sets her goals low, assuming she doesn't deserve to ever leave the town for bigger and better things.

Her time with Brian over the summer changes all of these things, however. Brian teaches D.J. how to communicate, which eventually leads her to using the skills with her family members and beginning to rebuild broken relationships. Building a friendship and sense of respect between herself and Brian also positively impacts D.J.'s confidence. She realizes she is just as talented and athletic as her brothers who she idolizes, she begins working on make-up work to improve her English grade, and she begins to understand that Brian may be attracted to her in the same way she is attracted to him - although she is afraid to say it outright.

As D.J. narrates the novel, readers can witness her mindset transitioning from negativity and resentment to confidence, hope, acceptance and pride. She learns to accept who she is and where she comes from, and by the end of the book is proud of the things that make her stand out. D.J. blossoms into a maturing teenager exploring her limits and flirting with love for the first time.

Style

Point of View

Dairy Queen is a first-person narrative recounted by D.J. Readers don't find out until the end that D.J. has supposedly written the book as an English assignment, but it is clear throughout the story that D.J. is the one telling it. It reads much like a diary.

It is important for readers to remember that they are only getting D.J.'s perspective on other people and situations, so they are often either not getting the whole story or are getting only her interpretation of what happened. For instance, she claims she is dumb and unattractive, although it is clear from the other characters' reactions to her that neither claim is true. This perspective also helps readers relate best to D.J., as she is the character most fleshed out and understood.

The first-person narrative is ideal for a coming-of-age story, because it allows readers to truly see the changes in thought and attitude made by the narrator.

Setting

Dairy Queen takes place in Wisconsin in modern times. The year is not provided, but the language of the narrator and main character suggest very recent times. The majority of the novel's action takes place on the Schwenk Family Farm. The farm is described as having once been pristinely kept but has fallen to disrepair in current times because D.J.'s father is hurt and can no longer take care of the farm the way he used to.

Small parts of the book also take place at Red Bend high school and in Madison, a town five hours away.

The contrast of Red Bend and Hawley, and having a main character from each town, shows that teenagers tend to experience the same sorts of angst and issues, whether they come from a small farming community (D.J.) or a wealthier town (Brian).

Language and Meaning

Dairy Queen is supposedly written by the main character, a teenage girl, so the language reflects that. The tone is very casual, as if D.J. were simply telling the story to a friend. Adding authenticity to the voice, the author uses improper grammar and slang regularly, while also injecting a good deal of emotion and (D.J.'s) opinion.

The language also provides hints to the story's midwest setting, as the narrator talks extensively about dairy farming and uses local slang such as 'pop' for 'soda.'

Structure

Dairy Queen is broken in to 31 Chapters, ranging from five to twelve pages. Each chapter is titled after the main action that occurs in it, so readers can have a good idea of where the story will go simply by reading the chapter titles in advance. Within the chapters, there are sections marked by extra spaces between paragraphs. Each section break makes either a period of time passing (usually short, within the same day) or the beginning of some backstory being shared.

The short chapters make it an easy book to start and stop reading as needed. The book covers just one summer, but remains interesting by including multiple story lines; there is the story of D.J. and Brian's relationship, the story of D.J. coming into her own, and the story of the Schwenk family relationships breaking down and being repaired.



Quotes

"Sometime when I start thinking about how screwed up our family is, or when it's cold and I'm milking and the machines won't work and a cow steps on my foot and my hands are so cold I keep dropping things, then I remember how I felt at that moment and I feel a little better" (Chapter 2).

"Sometimes - well, all the time - I can't think of what to say because I'm so dumb and stuff, and then maybe I think of it like five days later. But I'll remember that one. For the rest of my life I'll remember that 'no'" (Chapter 2).

"If this was a perfect world, We'd keep her forever and spend a million dollars trying to fix her sore legs and she'd die of old age in a rocking chair in some pretty green pasture. But this isn't a perfect world. It's Wisconsin, and feed costs money and vets costs money, and we barely have enough for the healthy cows" (Chapter 2).

"I hate it when people make fun of me and it turns out they're right" (Chapter 5).

"We worked in silence for a long time. Long enough that we were, you know, working together" (Chapter 7).

"I don't have many ideas, and not very many good ones. But this one got me excited" (Chapter 8).

"Apologizing is like taking a little ache you feel inside and making it ten times worse. Like punching a bruise. Who'd want to go through that pain" (Chapter 9).

"You've got to learn sometime that the world sucks. And I'd just learned it" (Chapter 10).

"Basically what it came down to was that my life sucked. It sucked even more than it had before Brian showed up, because now I knew it" (Chapter 12).

"Being with Brian, it was like I was practicing something I'd never known I needed but I might need again sometime, so getting it down - figuring out how to talk - would probably be a good idea" (Chapter 13).

"That's what you do in a family - you talk about things" (Chapter 14).

"Then I started thinking that maybe everyone in the whole world was just like a cow, and we all go along doing what we're supposed to without complaining or even really noticing, until we die" (Chapter 14).

"A girl wanting to play football? Maybe I really was crazy. But you have to remember, I wasn't all that bad a football player. I mean, it was a realistic thing - more realistic for me than ballet, say" (Chapter 16).



"But the real reason I wanted to play football...is because, well, this is going to sound really strange, and I'll probably never be able to explain to anyone. But if I made the Red Bend football team, it would mean I wasn't a cow" (Chapter 16).

"Because every time I started sinking low, I'd just remember about football. All this time I'd thought I wanted to be a trainer, when it turned out I wanted to be a player instead. I saw something I wanted to do and I decided to do it. The feeling of freedom this gave me - I can't even describe it. It was my decision. I chose it. I am not a cow" (Chapter 16).

"I didn't like Brian because he was a quarterback, I lied him even though he was a quarterback" (Chapter 19).

"You Schwenks, you're mess up. You might be good at football but you really suck at life" (Chapter 26).

"So if you're ever looking for motivation, there's one idea. Get everyone talking and you'll be sure to do whatever it is you need to do" (Chapter 26).

"And I crossed the goal ilne and baked a turn and tried to catch my breath, and all of sudden the noise hit me like a wall, everyone screaming like the world had stopped. Which, thinking abou tit now, I guess for a second or two it did" (Chapter 29).



Topics for Discussion

Dairy Queen is a coming-of-age novel. Discuss which character(s) is/are coming-of-age throughout the novel and in what ways. What type of growth does s/he experience? How does s/he change? What inspires and encourages those changes? Does the character realize that she is maturing?

D.J. makes it pretty clear to readers that her family has it's issues. Discuss what has caused the break-down of relationships within the Schwenk family and how they begin to be rebuilt toward the end of the novel.

How does D.J. and Brian's relationship evolve throughout the novel, and what contributes to the change?

D.J. and Brian have more to learn from one another than they realize. Discuss what each character learns from the other.

What techniques does the author use to make the narration of the novel authentic? How quickly can you tell who the narrator is what his/her age, location, and personality is like?

Discuss D.J.'s metaphor of people (including herself) as "cows" that runs throughout the novel. Where does she get the idea to use cows for her metaphor and In what ways does she believe people in her town act like cows?

Communication is a major theme throughout Dairy Queen. Discuss how the theme of 'communication' relates to at least four different characters within the novel.

Football is a motif throughout Daily Queen. What is the importance of football to the characters in the novel? Why might the author have selected this sport instead of any other one?

Describe the perspective that the story is told through and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using this point-of-view to tell a story like this.