

Death Be Not Proud: A Memoir Study Guide

Death Be Not Proud: A Memoir by John Gunther

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Plot Summary

Death Be Not Proud by John Gunther tells the story of Johnny Gunther, a young man who died on June 30, 1947. He was only seventeen years old. His father, a distinguished journalist and the author of this book, wrote Johnny's story to help others learn more about the devastating effects of a brain tumor.

Johnny spent his earliest years in Paris, Vienna, and London. His family came back to the United States when he was seven and a half years old, and they settled in Connecticut. Johnny loved to learn with a passion, and he attended Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts. One of his main goals was to graduate from there then move on to attend Harvard. No one knew about his illness until fifteen months before his death.

Death Be Not Proud offers the reader a glimpse of Johnny's life before his illness. It set up his character and showed his relationship with his parents, who were separated but amicable towards each other. It showed how Johnny and his parents discovered that he was ill and showed the gradual decline that led to death.

In the fifteen months of his illness, his family and the medical team did everything they could to help cure Johnny. They tried standardized treatments. They experimented with new treatments. They even tried to help him by drastically changing his diet. At times, it seemed as if the experimental methods were working, and everyone was filled with hope. Other times, it was obvious that he wasn't going to make it. Even when his health was deteriorating rapidly, Johnny did everything he could to keep current academically. He was particularly interested in science and kept trying to continue his experiments. He finished high school, and he applied to Harvard.

Johnny's death made a huge impact on the world, according to his father. He wrote about the letters that came to the family by the hundreds. The parents found out that slides from Johnny's brain would be of import to the world's neurological institute because Johnny's case was rare. He maintained his eyesight and managed to keep comparatively well right up to the point of death.

In the second part of the book, the author shared letters that Johnny had written throughout his life. The first letters were written when he was approximately seven years old, and the last letter was written months before his death. The letters were followed by entries from Johnny's personal diary. The first entry was in 1944, long before his illness. The last entries were four days before he died. Through these entries, it is clear to the reader that Johnny was obsessed with science and his experiments.

In the last part of the book, Johnny's mother reflected on parenting a child who was dying. She talked about life and death and wishes. She reflected on their life together, highlighting the good times, and addressed the areas she wished she had improved upon during his lifetime. The book closes with "Unbeliever's Prayer" written by Johnny slightly over a year before his death.

Foreword to Chapter 2

Foreword to Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Death Be Not Proud by John Gunther tells the story of Johnny Gunther, a young man who died on June 30, 1947. He was only seventeen years old. His father, a distinguished journalist and the author of this book, wrote Johnny's story to help others learn more about the devastating effects of a brain tumor.

Foreword. In the Foreword, the author introduced the reader to Johnny. He explained that the story wasn't about life-and-death, but it was about the boy's illness. He wanted to explain what happened to Johnny's brain. It was the author's hope that he could provide insight and comfort to other families who were going through similar situations.

Johnny was conceived in California, but he was born in Paris. When he was a few months old, the family moved to Vienna, where they stayed until he was six years old. They moved to London when he was six, and they stayed there for a year and half before returning to the United States and living in Connecticut. The author described Johnny as a tall boy who was once plump, but was slender by the time he died. He was blond, with blue eyes and had a selfless character. When the doctor informed him of bad news, his greatest concern was for his parents and their reaction to the news.

The author looked back on Johnny's life and highlighted the images Johnny had drawn from a very young age. Johnny had been interested in transportation, and he created a concept for a machine that conquered space and time. He was also interested in music, especially woodwinds, which he would listen to for hours. As he grew older, Johnny developed an interest in games, especially chess. He became fascinated by many types of science from weather forecasting to experimenting in the garden with hydroponics. He studied rocks, learned magic tricks, and kept detailed records of his experiments.

The author pointed out that Johnny wasn't a prodigy, although his IQ was superior. Johnny didn't have wonderful grades, and he had a very difficult time focusing. He also struggled with neatness. Johnny was a sensitive boy who found it easy to talk with adults. He wasn't aggressive, and he gained popularity due to his easy-going nature.

Chapter 1. "Death Be Not Proud." In 1945, Johnny came home from his boarding school for Christmas looking great. He was getting taller, and he was full of energy. When he went to go back his school, he commented that it was the best ten days he had ever had. He came home for spring holiday in March of 1946, and his parents took him on several outings. His father thought Johnny seemed a bit tired, but it didn't seem like a big deal. He had just been to the doctor and was given a clean bill of health. The previous summer Johnny had some eye problems and was currently trying to strengthen his vision through exercises. When he went to the eye doctor, they discovered that his eyes had improved.



After seeing the doctor, Johnny complained of a slightly stiff neck, but they didn't think it was a big deal since he had just been approved by the doctor. In April, the author received notice from the school that their son had a stiff neck and was in the infirmary. There had been a polio scare at the school, so they were having him doubled-checked, but they didn't think he had polio. On April 25, the parents received a call that a neurologist had seen their son, and they thought that Johnny had a brain tumor. The author got in touch with his ex-wife, Frances, and they went to the school together. Johnny hadn't known they were going to visit and was excited to see them.

They found out that their son had gone to the doctor that morning with a nurse from the school. She noticed that he was stumbling in the corridor. She reported this, and they decided to do an optical check and a spinal tap, which showed that there was pressure in the fluid surrounding his brain. This is the first of many tests and examinations that Johnny would have for the rest of his life. They tried many different techniques and experiments on him. Johnny had at least thirty-two doctors, some of the best in the world, treat him before he died.

Johnny went to the Neurological Institute in New York, where he developed an excruciating headache. They did more testing on him, and they operated on April 29, 1946. During the six-hour operation, surgeons opened his skull so that they could remove the tumor using suction and other devices. Their goal was to get as much of the tumor as possible. When the surgery was over, the parents were informed that the tumor was the size of an orange and that the surgeon was only able to get half of it out. That evening Johnny recovered and began talking with them. The nurse was shocked at his ability to speak and comprehend what happened to him.

He made a remarkable recovery, despite the fact that he couldn't open his eyes for forty-eight hours. He was concerned that he was blind, but this was not the case. He was concerned about his schoolwork and didn't want to fall behind. He dictated a letter to Professor Einstein regarding some thoughts he had. Einstein responded to him stating that he didn't really understand what he is trying to say.

Johnny tried to remain in good spirits, and people around the family commented on his good nature. He was also very considerate. Science continued to interest him, and he wanted to know every little detail about his medication and treatments. At this point, they didn't know whether or not Johnny would recuperate, but they were hoping he would. They talked about doing x-ray therapy, and they learned about different types of cancers. The parents lied to Johnny, telling him that his tumor was dead and that the surgeon had gotten it all. He was frustrated by his weakness. Going back to school was his main goal, and he wanted to know what caused his tumor. During this time, Johnny wrote a prayer that he called the "Unbeliever's Prayer". On May 28th, the parents learned that Johnny's tumor was undergoing a change. It was now a fatal type of cancer. Johnny commented that he had so much to do and so little time.

Chapter 2. When Johnny left the Neurological Institute, he had to stay in an apartment in New York because he had to go back to the Institute daily for x-ray treatment. He did this until June 20 when they stopped the treatment because of the danger of killing off



tissue and causing white blood cells to deteriorate. Johnny moved to the house in Connecticut for the summer, where he had a workshop and laboratory in the garage. He had certain limitations since his skull had a flap, which the surgeons had left due to recurring surgeries and the growth of the tumor. However, he was able to spend time with friends, barbecue, and work on his science projects.

His parents had tried to keep the truth from him about his tumor by telling him it was almost gone. They had hidden the encyclopedia, so when he went to research his tumor, he couldn't find information on it. As the summer progressed, the growth increased once again. Johnny's parents tried to tell him that was typical after x-rays. He began to show physical signs of problems such as weakening muscles, deteriorating vision, and a slight lag on the left side of his mouth.

On July 12th, Johnny went to his regular doctor for a check, and the doctor sent Johnny on to a specialist. The specialist, Masson, told them that Johnny would not live more than a few more months. On July 17, the bump had opened and was leaking puss. After a series of medical appointments, the family found out that his type of tumor generally resulted in a loss of all function in the patient. The patient would most likely die a vegetable. This did not happen to Johnny.

The family tried everything they could to find the best specialists to treat Johnny. Medical personnel discussed the option of sealing Johnny's skull, which would drive the tumor inward, killing him. Frances read about a new, experimental technique in which tumors were treated by intravenous dosages of mustard gas. They decided to try it. While all this was happening, Johnny kept his good spirits and did everything he could to keep up with his academic progression. He received his first doses of mustard between August 1 and August 5. The author felt that the first series was very beneficial, but wasn't so sure about the second dosage.

His teachers continued helping him, to Johnny's delight. They visited him and helped him keep up with his work. By August 31, Johnny was not doing well. His parents and the doctors searched for different remedies and through their research they learned about Gerson, who treated patients with a radical diet. Johnny moved into Gerson's nursing home on September 7.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3. Johnny was not doing well when he entered the nursing home, and his doctor later admitted that he didn't think the teen would last for a week. His blood count was extremely low. However, within a week, he started improving. Not only was he gaining strength, but his bruises were disappearing, and the bump on his head was diminishing. The doctor took him off his penicillin and insisted that Johnny rest for several weeks. His diet had no salt or fat, and proteins were at an extreme minimum. The point of this diet was to change the chemistry of the body so that it would eliminate the disease.

The method was extremely controversial. Other diseases had been cured by this diet, but no one knew how it would work for up with a malignant glioblastoma. Johnny hated the diet, but he stuck with it knowing that it might be a cure. He joked about the situation to alleviate stress. He did begin to get better, and the family had high hopes for recovery. Many of their doctors were also very optimistic. Although things were very encouraging, they didn't stop researching other options.

In the autumn of 1946, Johnny's parents established a regular routine for visitation. Everyone was looking forward to the day when Johnny could go home. Again, Johnny showed how much he cared about other people when he had a nosebleed in the middle of the night and he apologized for being too much trouble. Frances was particularly good at helping him keep his spirits up. She brought him gifts and read to him.

Other friends would drop in and visit him, and Johnny's father noticed that when he played chess, his field of vision was limited so he couldn't see the entire board at one time. On November 4, they celebrated his birthday with imitation ice cream. Johnny wasn't always a delight, and sometimes he did lash out, but after those rare occasions, he apologized. He blocked out the importance of his tumor by coming up with different theories about it such as the fact that it never was really big, it was clearing up, and that it was gone after the surgery. He kept good spirits, even though he was tiring more easily, and he was having difficulty with his left hand.

Although his strength was better, the bump began to get worse. It became two bumps and became hard. His parents had to inform Johnny that he would not be going back to school, and it disappointed him, but didn't crush him. They hired tutors, and he did as much work as possible with his tutors' support.

Things began to get much worse very quickly. Johnny was feverish and very tired. The tumor was getting much bigger, and the doctors wanted to surgically remove it. Gerson vehemently opposed, stating that the tumor was dead and that it was sloughing itself out of his head. The battle between the doctors added a lot of stress for the family. The



doctors finally compromised, and Johnny was taken back to Neurological where they were able to drain the tumor, leading to a great physical improvement.

For a while, things begin to fluctuate from slightly bad to good. Johnny's father had a book deal, and Johnny was happy that they wouldn't have to worry about finances for a while. He continued to do his best to keep up with his schoolwork and was even allowed home for thirty-six hours over Christmas. The tumor was deemed "quiescent". The family was filled with hope.

Chapter 4. Nobody knew why Johnny was doing so well. What they did know, however, was that the hopeful time didn't last. Johnny's mother had been helping him with physical activity. She taught them how to use the stronger parts of his body to compensate for the weaker areas. She also talked with him about girls, and when he expressed interest in a girl named Mary, they arranged to meet. Things were looking good until the end of February. At this time, the bump began to bulge again. Johnny had a trembling attack and amnesia one day. This was followed by several more incidents of amnesia attacks.

Johnny was obsessed with catching up on his schoolwork and taking the Harvard entrance exams. He also wanted to know when he could take a break from his severely restricted diet. By March, he had caught up on the work for his history course, and by April, he had passed the English examination. He filled out his application for Harvard and took the college board exams on April 12.

The bump was growing once again, and the doctors and parents decided to treat it with hormones, but it wasn't enough. Another surgery was on the horizon. This time, the lump remained hard, and they were not able to drain it. Johnny saw another specialist on April 25, who offered some hope. The doctor recommended taking him off the strict diet and attempting a drastic surgical procedure. After much consultation, the parents decided to forgo the diet.

The surgery did not bring good news. The tumor was growing very rapidly, and it was even invading Johnny's scalp. The surgeon had gone 11 cm into his brain but had never penetrated to healthy brain tissue. Johnny recovered quickly, and he was talking to everyone on May 2. He claimed that this surgical operation hadn't been as bad as ones he had in the past.



Chapter 5 and Aftermath

Chapter 5 and Aftermath Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5. During the two weeks after the surgery, the family watched carefully. The bulge not only disappeared, but it became a concavity. Johnny was upset and remarked that he was always in a haze. Frances went to visit her sister to get away from all the stress for a short while. On May 15, Johnny was cleared to go home. He stayed relatively well for a while, although it was increasingly difficult for him in regards to motor skills. He had difficulty with shoelaces and his belt. His left hand was clumsy and wouldn't open properly. However, his brain still remain sharp, and Johnny frequently helped his father with his work and continued to do his own schoolwork. The family received the news that he was able to graduate with his class.

Johnny's graduation date was June 4, and the family drove out to Deerfield, his school, on May 27. The boys in his class accepted him readily. The trip was exhausting for him, but Johnny was thrilled. He marched in with the other boys, and he received his diploma to tremendous applause.

When they were back in New York, the doctors and family continued to search for a cure, unwilling to accept the thought that Johnny might still die. They felt that Johnny loved life so much that it was their duty to do anything they possibly could to keep him alive. Johnny was beginning to understand how sick he was and became frustrated with medical limitations. He was hospitalized once again on June 12. When he was discharged, he had two or three good days during which he went out to films and spent time with friends.

On June 27, he had another bout of amnesia. He began to have problems regulating his temperature, and he was greatly fatigued. Johnny seemed to be getting better on Sunday, but his father felt something was amiss and called to tell his ex-wife that he thought she ought to come. Johnny's father wrote that Sunday was one of the best days Johnny had since he first became ill. They discussed books and writing and talked about going to the country on Tuesday.

On Monday, June 30, Johnny was so tired he could barely get out of the bathtub. He went to the doctor to see if it was okay for him to travel on Tuesday, and nobody saw anything really wrong. At home, Johnny developed an excruciating headache. Trying to cheer him up, his father told him an outright lie, telling Johnny that he had been admitted to Harvard. Johnny acted quite satisfied. Later that day, Johnny's parents realized that their son was dying. He had a cerebral hemorrhage. They took him to a nearby hospital and put him on oxygen. Johnny died in his sleep - painlessly, fearlessly, and without ever having an awareness of his impending death.

Aftermath. In this chapter, Johnny's father reflected on the funeral. They were surrounded by friends and loved ones. The father commented that when Johnny died,

nature took note. There was a heavy wind when he died, but the day of the funeral was very peaceful, with warm air and blue sky. He tried to understand why his son's life was taken away when it held so much promise. He wrote about the hundreds of letters that came in the mail, including ones from the doctors who treated him, telling them of how much Johnny had impacted their lives. The family was told that the slides from Johnny's brain would be very important to the neurological institute in the world because it was so unique that he remained so well up to the very end.

Part Two

Part Two Summary and Analysis

The first part of Part Two was titled "A Few More of His Letters". This section showed some of the letters written by Johnny. It gave the reader insight into his personality, and also gave a glimpse from Johnny's own vantage of his interests and the struggles he had overcome with his illness. The first letter was written when he was seven years old, and it showed an interest in his father's work.

Other letters, written to his parents when they were in the Far East in 1937 in 1938, showed that the young boy had an avid interest in the solar system, and he was intrigued by his first view of a science laboratory and a scientist who demonstrated many experiments. In 1939, Johnny's letters highlighted his interest in music. He decided to make his own flute and wanted his parents to send him a violin. He also wrote that he was beginning to compose a rondo.

The letters to his parents showed that the parents traveled frequently around the world. They included Johnny in activities whenever they could, and he had relatives and friends that he visited and who traveled with him. When he was eleven years old, he wrote about going to an observatory and asked his father to send him his chemistry books. When he was thirteen, Johnny enjoyed taking chemistry and had identified six alloys or metals and was making models of atoms. When Johnny was fourteen, he started taking geology classes and found them very interesting. When he was fifteen, he was learning to do parallel crises and was working on improving his grades. His letters showed a great interest in film and in literature.

He dealt with normal problems that teens faced, such as dealing with acne and trying to keep his room respectably clean. He mentioned doing his eye exercises every day. Johnny demonstrated a close relationship with his parents through his letters. In one letter to his father, he commented on how the physics teacher had told the class that if the students spent two hours a night on their subject, they would do all right. He didn't find the subject very difficult.

When he was sixteen, Johnny wrote to his mother about the Smyth Report on atomic power that his father had gotten him. He told her that he would tell her more about it over vacation, but also mentioned some of his reactions to the book and highlighted some of the scientific concepts contained in the book. He received good grades in physics and stated that he read a great deal in the science library on physical chemistry, atomic physics, the quantum theory, relativity, and other topics of interest. Johnny wrote to his father, sharing scientific equations for experiments he was working on. He wrote that he was reading a college physics books, which took him a long time to read, but he enjoyed it.



After his first operation, Johnny wrote to some school friends describing his hospital stay. He made light of it stating that he didn't have to worry about school or athletics. He explained that they had to drill three holes into his skull. In a letter to another friend, he described his operation as a torturous ordeal, but said that he was doing better. Johnny kept in touch with teachers from his school as well as his friends. He mentioned his determination to finish his school work so he could pass his exams. He also wrote about his struggles with his strict diet, but he also mentioned that he thought he had gotten the hang of it.

The next section of Part Two was entitled "The Diary". Johnny kept a diary at his mother's suggestion. He wrote it sporadically over a period of years. The diary highlighted some of his interests as he was growing up. It also detailed his daily existence. The reader learned about who he was as a real person. He worked in the garden, learned magic tricks, went to plays and films, and worked on his experiments.

His written comments on medical treatments were interspersed with scientific ideas such as space and time travel intervals. He shared some of his concern over his treatments and conditions, but showed a determination to live life to the fullest while he was alive. He showed an appreciation for his parents and wrote about growing up. Johnny showed pride in the schoolwork he completed and shared his concerns with his mother.

Johnny mentioned that he discussed fears of death with his mother and decided to accept death without detachment. He embraced life and enjoyed spending time with Mary Sanders. The last entries in his journal emphasized his dedication to knowledge. He had just finished reading "Human Destiny" by Du Nuoy, a book that proves the existence of God from evolution and through scientific reasoning. His very last entry told about a trip to the public library, where he collected information on liquid NH₃.

The next section of Part Two was titled, "A Word From Frances". This section contained heartfelt ruminations from a mother who witnessed the death of her child. She questioned many things such as the meaning of life, relationships, politics, science, and religion. The relationship Frances had with her son was so close that she had the opportunity to talk with her son about all these things as he was dying. There were many things that she wished she had changed. She wished that she had loved her son more and that she had been able to hold the marriage together.

After he died, Frances had a hard time facing all the things that he used to love. She remembered how he had especially loved his Chem lab. One thing she learned about the experience was to look death in the face and not fear it. She also learned to appreciate what a joy of life was. She remembered with fondness all the experiences they had together from reading books together to sailing, and she recalled all they had planned for the future. Johnny's death taught her to love life more and to care more for other people all over the world. It also taught her to care more about God.



Characters

Johnny

Johnny Gunther was the main character in this book. He lived from 1929 until 1947. He was highly intelligent and had a great interest in science, particularly physics and chemistry. Johnny lived internationally in his earliest years, but moved to America to stay before he was ten years old. His parents were divorced, but the divorce was very amicable. He had a close relationship with both of his parents. His father was a writer, and Johnny like to help him with his writing, and he was always there to encourage his father and offer suggestions for his books. He shared his thoughts and feelings freely with his mother.

According to a camp counselor from when he was young, Johnny was very popular. He was slow to anger and very cheerful. This made the other children like him. As his tumor began to grow, Johnny showed a great strength of character by being more concerned about those around him and he was himself. He sometimes became frustrated by his limitations and by the limitations of medical science, but he did his best to remain cheerful even when times were extremely tough. He willingly participated in experimental treatments, even though they caused him great discomfort. He understood that everyone was trying to help him. With the type of cancer Johnny had, in all theory, he should have died a vegetable. This was not the case, however. He remained cognizant and generally mobile right up to the day he died.

Frances

Frances was Johnny's mother. she was divorced from Johnny's father, John, but the two maintained an amicable relationship. They worked together to provide the best care for Johnny. She constantly researched to find the top physicians in the world and to seek out any option available for treatment in hopes that they might cure Johnny's cancer. When Johnny was feeling depressed, she helped him feel better. When he lost some physical mobility, she taught him how to compensate for his weaknesses using the stronger parts of his body.

When Johnny was up to it, Frances would take him to lectures into films. They played games together, sailed together, and gardened together. She helped him focus on life outside the illness by talking with him about typical teenage topics. When he expressed interest in a girl, it was Francis who helped put him in touch with Mary.

At one point, Frances went to visit her sister to escape the stressful situation for a short period of time, but other than that she was constantly there for Johnny. After his death, she stated that she wished she had loved him more. She remembered all their hopes and dreams together and appreciated the fact that his experience had taught her to love life more and to care more for the people around her. Her ex-husband, the author of this



book, credited Frances for her wise and discriminating help and her generosity in sharing her records and memories.

John

John was Johnny's father. He was a world-renown journalist.

Dr. Traeger

Dr. Traeger was the family doctor.

Dr. Johnson

Dr. Johnson was the school doctor at Deerfield Academy.

Dr. Hahn

Dr. Hahn was the neurologist that Deerfield Academy sent Johnny to. He is the man who told the parents that they thought Johnny had a brain tumor.

Dr. Masson

Dr. Masson was the neurologist they sent Johnny to at Neurological so he could study the bump on Johnny's head.

Max Gerson

Max Gersten treated illnesses such as cancer by using a therapy based on a diet. His work was very controversial, but helped many.

Lester Mount

Of all the doctors Johnny worked with, he was closest to Dr. Trager and to Lester Mount.

Mary

Mary was the girl Johnny was romantically interested in.



Mr. Boyden

Mr. Boyden was a teacher who drove down from Deerfield to spend a day with Johnny while he was ill.

Mr. Hayden

Mr. Hayden was a teacher who drove down from Deerfield to spend a day with Johnny while he was ill.



Objects/Places

California

This is where Johnny was conceived.

Paris

Johnny was born in Paris.

Vienna

Johnny's family moved to Vienna when he was a few months old.

Austrian Alps

Johnny's family vacationed in the Austrian Alps when he was very young.

England

Johnny's family moved to London, England when he was six

Wilton, Ct.

Johnny and his family moved to Wilton after he lived in England.

New York City

Johnny went to a school in New York City before attending Deerfield Academy. His father lived in an apartment in New York City.

Deerfield Academy

This is the high school in Massachusetts that Johnny graduated from.

Dr. Gerson's Nursing Home

Johnny was put on a very strict diet while he stayed in Dr. Gerson's Nursing Home as they tried to eradicate his cancer.



Medical Center

Johnny went to the Medical Center on West 168th street in New York City for surgeries.

Harvard

It was Johnny's goal to attend Harvard. He applied and completed his exams hoping to get in.

Themes

Death

Death is a a major theme in this book. The title of the book is *Death Be Not Proud*, and the author states clearly that the book was written to help others going through similar situations. It offers a detailed glimpse of how brain tumors affect patients, and how brain tumors were treated back in the 1940s. The family and the doctors faced death fighting. Johnny's parents try to shield their son from knowing that he was going to die, but at times he acted as if he knew it anyway. He wrote about how much he had to do before death, and he speculated on religion, even writing his own prayer.

Johnny's death was intriguing to the medical community because it was so different from the way that medical textbooks predicted it should be. According to the books, Johnny should have been blind, and he would have lost so much function that he would basically be a vegetable at the point of his death. Instead, he was walking around, still had his vision, and was generally cognizant until the day of his death.

When Johnny died, it inspired his father to write this book. It was part catharsis and, judged by its success in sales over the decades, very helpful to readers around the world who were going through tough situations and facing death themselves. Johnny's death also made a big impact on his mother's life. It taught her to appreciate life more. It also taught her to care more about the people she came across during her life.

Attitude

Attitude is another major theme in this book. When faced with an uphill medical battle, Johnny's parents refused to give up. Instead they, along with Johnny, continued to research and kept a positive attitude. They were willing to try anything they could to help keep Johnny alive, including new experimental methods such as mustard gas intravenous treatments and specialized diets. Johnny also kept a positive attitude even when times were difficult. He detested the diet he was put on, but knew was for his own good so he stuck with it. He joked about it and made light of situations by cracking jokes when he was feeling most uncomfortable.

Johnny also had a very determined attitude when it came to academics. He was determined to graduate and worked with tutors, wrote letters to his teachers, and classmates even when he was hospitalized. His determination was realized when he was able to complete all his exams in a timely manner, and he was able to attend his high school graduation and receive a diploma.

The people in Johnny's life were in awe of his attitude. He was generally cheerful, and at the times where he lost his temper or became depressed, he would come back later and apologize. He teased the medical staff around him, and he showed concern for others when times were tough. When he found out that the edge of the bone next to



the flap in his skull was growing back in the wrong direction, his first reaction was to protect his mother from the knowledge. When he got a severe nosebleed in the middle of the night, he apologized for inconveniencing the medical staff and his parents.

Science

Science was another main theme in this book. Johnny became interested in science from a very early age. He loved all types of science, from weather forecasting to geology. As he grew older, he developed a keen interest in physics and chemistry. His journal and letters were filled with formulas and notes about his experiments.

When he was in high school, Johnny was working his way through a college physics book, spending hours trying to interpret each page. At one point during his hospitalization, he wrote a letter to Einstein with a theory. Einstein wrote back to him saying he didn't really understand the letter. Later, Johnny told a friend that when he read his letter he didn't understand what he was trying to say, either. He blamed it on having too much caffeine in his system after a cancer treatment. After Johnny died, many things that he loved reminded his mother of her son. She felt that his greatest love was his chemistry lab in their house in Connecticut. It was the most difficult thing for her to face since he spent so many happy hours experimenting in his lab.

The book also talked about the science of dealing with brain tumors. The doctors and the family were constantly trying different methods for eradicating the brain tumor. They tried surgery, they tried diet changes, they tried x-ray treatments, and they tried mustard gas. The doctors kept some slides from Johnny to use for medical research even after his death.



Style

Perspective

Death Be Not Proud was written by Johnny's father, John Gunther. He was one of the best-known and one of the most admired journalists of his day. He had a particular knack for gathering information and presenting it to others in an entertaining and easily understandable form.

This book was unique because John lived the research firsthand. He knew every doctor the family dealt with, he understood the medical jargon, he knew how his son reacted as a patient, and he knew how he and his ex-wife faced each day with Johnny, right up to the end. He lived the reality of fighting a brain tumor. He was inspired by Johnny while Johnny was alive. Johnny would enthusiastically read his work and offer suggestions and insight.

Death Be Not Proud is a compilation of the hopes and struggles that the other family went through during the illness. John used anecdotes and exact quotes to support his points and tell the whole story. Through these, he made the characters seem real to the reader.

John Gunther wrote this book in honor of Johnny. All the proceeds from the book went towards cancer research for children. In the synopsis of the book it was written that his memoir stood out because the author had emotional restraint. John obviously had a great love for his son, but the book is more of a step-by-step account of a family that is dealing with a lethal brain tumor in the 1940s. It seemed more scientific than emotional.

Tone

The tone of Death Be Not Proud was subjective and written in first person. The tone was very relaxed, and it felt as if the author were at a party with someone who asked him about his experience with his son. Although the tone was casual, the author clearly defined medical terms and scientific concepts. He did this in a manner that was easy to follow so the reader didn't get lost. All the difficult terms were used in context or explained in detail. For example, when he talked about the astrocytoma, the author explained that it was a comparatively benign type of tumor.

The details written about Johnny's life helped connect the reader to the main character through shared experiences. Readers would most likely appreciate the freedom of being able to go out and enjoy a play or movie. They could connect with the importance of graduation, and understand how enjoyable it must have been to have restrictions lifted after a very strict diet. Readers could also relate to financial worries related to illness, so they connected with the joy of the family when the father's book was published, relieving the family of financial burden for a while. The author tried to show a balanced view of Johnny as a human. He showed how incredibly smart the boy was, gave examples of



his good nature, and expressed appreciation for his positive attitude and concern for those around him. He also pointed out some of Johnny's weaker areas such as his lack of neatness.

Structure

Death Be Not Proud began with a page that said "In Memoriam John Gunther Junior 1929 to 1947". This was followed by a poem by John Donne, which had the first line of "Death, be not proud. ..." This was followed by an acknowledgment in which the author thanks his ex-wife for her help with the book. The actual body of the book opened with an eighteen-page Foreword in which the author described why he wrote the book and gave a summary of Johnny's life and what it meant to him.

The bulk of the book consisted of a section in Part One titled "Death Be Not Proud". This section consisted of five chapters that each ranged between twenty and thirty pages long. This part detailed Johnny's story from right before they discovered he had a brain tumor until his death. The last section in Part One was titled, "Aftermath". This five-page section detailed his funeral.

Part Two of the novel was split into four sections ranging from ten to under thirty pages. It began with a quote, then a section titled "A Few More of His Letters". These letters were written by Johnny throughout his life from when he was a young child and through his hospital stays. The next part, "The Diary", highlighted excerpts from Johnny's personal journal from when he was young until four days before he died. This was followed by a section titled "A Word From Frances". In this section, Johnny's mother wrote about his battle to survive and what his death meant to her. The book ended with the "Unbelievers Prayer", written by Johnny in 1946.

An addition, the book offered information about the author, John Gunther. There was a four-page detailed summary of his professional life and his private life. This was followed by a section that detailed book reviews written over the decades.



Quotes

"Dr. Hahn said, "I think your child has a brain tumor."
Chap. 1, Death Be Not Proud, p. 23

"That building!-It became the citadel of all our hopes and fears for more than a year, the prison of all our dreams."
Chap. 1, Death Be Not Proud, p. 28

"It was as if he were girding himself for the struggle only too obviously underway, between life and Death."
Chap. 2, Death Be Not Proud, p. 52

"We waited, and then with everybody listening Penfield cut through all the euphemisms and said directly, 'Your child has a malignant glioma, and it will kill him. '"
Chap. 2, Death Be Not Proud, p. 55

"Give nature opportunity, and nature herself will heal."
Chap. 3, Death Be Not Proud, p. 69

"Cancer is a rebellion-a gangster outbreak of misplaced cells."
Chap. 3, Death Be Not Proud, p. 78

"Johnny's brain, we learned later, weighed 2,000 grams. The average for a normal, fully-grown male is fifteen hundred. The largest male brain ever known weighed 2,222."
Chap. 5, Death Be Not Proud, p. 116

"Our decisions were almost always dictated by successive emergencies, with one delicate consideration poised against another, and they were not taken lightly, I can assure you."
Chap. 5, Death Be Not Proud, p. 125

"Putnam's last word was, 'Let's keep on struggling.'"
Chap. 5, Death Be Not Proud, p. 129

"What is life? It departs covertly. Like a thief Death took him."
Chap. 5, Death Be Not Proud, p. 137

"Live while you're living then die and be done with-never refuse challenge-never give up trying etc."
The Diary, Death Be Not Proud, p. 171

"Nothing, not even the birth of one's child, brings one so close to life as his death."
A Word From Frances, Death Be Not Proud, p. 187

"He was living and dying and being reborn all at the same time each day."
A Word From Frances, Death Be Not Proud, p. 188



Topics for Discussion

What were some of the early signs of Johnny's illness?

How did Johnny, his father, and his mother each respond to the news of his illness?

Johnny's parents chose to keep the fact that he was dying away from Johnny. Do you think this was a good choice?

What were some of Johnny's strengths and what were some of his weaknesses?

What happened with regard to Johnny's Harvard application, and do you think this was good or bad?

Describe how Johnny felt about academia.

How did Johnny's life and death affect his parents and others he came in contact with?

Why do you think this book has been popular for so many decades?