

# Debbie Harry Sings in French Study Guide

## Debbie Harry Sings in French by Meagan Brothers

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# Contents

<a href="#">Debbie Harry Sings in French Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-6.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7-9.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10-12.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13-15.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 16-19.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 20-22.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 23-25.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>



## Plot Summary

Debbie Harry Sings in French is a highly acclaimed novel for young adults written by Meagan Brothers in 2008. Winner of numerous awards, the book follows the life of Johnny from the ages of twelve through sixteen as he discovers his identity.

Johnny has a typical childhood until his father dies, and his mother subsequently goes into a depression for four years. Johnny, at 12, learns how to pay bills, clean the house, and do the groceries. Over the years, the stress gets to him and he finds solace in drinking alcohol.

One night at a club, a girl slips Johnny what he thinks is Tylenol, but it is ecstasy. He overdoses and ends up in the hospital. The next day he goes to rehab, where he discovers the music of Blondie.

Fresh out of rehab, Johnny doesn't quite fit in at home anymore. His mother, who has emerged back into the world of the living, sends him to South Carolina to live with his father's brother, Uncle Sam. At Sam's house, Johnny meets Maria, who becomes his girlfriend. He gets harassed by Maria's ex-boyfriend and his friends. Johnny is perceived by many as gay.

Maria buys a dress like Debbie Harry's and gives it to Johnny to try on. He does. Something about it feels right. Soon later, he enters a drag contest two and a half hours away in Atlanta. He gets the audience award. And over time, Johnny discovers that he likes dressing in women's clothing, that he is a transvestite.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

### Chapter 1

Johnny, at 12 years old, spends time with his babysitter Tessa after school, because both of his parents work. Tessa is a lover of vinyl records, particularly The Cure and Joy Division. They dance around the living room. Johnny sees her as a friend rather than babysitter. He prefers his time with her to the after-school program at the YMCA.

Johnny's father gets in a car accident when he falls asleep at the wheel, killing himself and a bus full of seniors. At first his uncle moves in to help with the day-to-day activities, but his presence brings back painful memories for Johnny's mother and she asks him to leave. At this point, Johnny's mother unplugs from society and leaves her son to figure out how to run the household. She stops working, cleaning, cooking. Johnny adapts and picks up the slack, even paying the bills. He is scared of being sent to a foster home if people learn what is going on at home. Johnny tries to motivate his mother to get a job since their savings are dwindling but she doesn't. They move somewhere smaller, and Johnny discovers drinking as a way of managing his stress enough to fall asleep at night.

### Chapter 2

Chapter 2 jumps to Johnny at 16 years old. He and his friend Terry are Goths and dress the part. Black nail polish, pale skin, black eyeliner. They drink a lot. Terry is into a variety of drugs as well but Johnny sticks with alcohol.

Johnny's mother has snapped out of her stupor, thanks to reading a book about grief. She turns from being apathetic to being quite religious. She disapproves of Johnny's clothing and ways and thinks he is on the road to hell.

Johnny and Terry hang out at the 7-Eleven, and some tourists mock them, calling them vampires. Later they go to Scotty's place and play Nintendo 64 video games. Scotty is the local drug dealer who has a trailer on the outskirts of town.

Johnny has a moment where he feels compelled to go outside. He catches a glimpse of himself as if from outside of himself and he questions how he came to be where he is. He feels a disconnect between what is inside him and the life he is living.

### Chapter 3

Johnny's mother sends him to his room following an argument. Johnny sneaks out through his window, and goes with Terry to a dance club.



At the club, Terry and his new crush Stephanie take ecstasy, but Johnny declines. He runs into Tessa. She is now married to Dave from the record store, which they now run together. Johnny has a headache and Stephanie gives him what he thinks is Tylenol. Johnny hits the dance floor with Tessa and they dance as they used to. Then Johnny goes blank. He wakes up in the hospital. Soon after, a psychiatric assessment determines that Johnny should go to rehab. He is surprisingly relieved.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The first chapter is packed with information. Johnny's parents worked, his father was never around, and he had a great babysitter who heavily influenced his musical tastes towards Goth. Johnny is a good kid with a simple life. When his father dies, his world changes. His mother's deterioration turns Johnny, at thirteen years old, into a care-giver. He just had a babysitter, and now he is watching over his mother.

As Johnny looks back, he doesn't complain about his new reality, he just accepts that is how it was. And then when the story jumps forward to his mother's recovery three years later, her newfound religious fervor makes Johnny question if he preferred his mother when she was catatonic.

Johnny is intelligent and has a keen awareness. He understands the factors that led to his drinking. He sees that his behavior is inconsistent with his hopes and dreams, and he sees that the same is true of his friends. He has always been smart enough to avoid drugs, but it is the drugs that he accidentally take that actually change the course of Johnny's life. He is almost relieved when he is sent to rehab. It gives him a new beginning.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary

Johnny is in rehab at Parkwood. One morning he hears Blondie's Debbie Harry singing in French on the radio as part of an All 80's Weekend show. He is instantly taken with her voice. Julia, the girl who owns the radio, makes a cassette for Johnny of the Best of Blondie.

Over his weeks at Parkwood, Johnny discovers that perhaps Debbie Harry's music can fill the void in him he'd been trying to fill with alcohol. He listens to the music religiously, every Sunday morning. Near the end of Johnny's stay, Julia shows Johnny a picture of Debbie Harry in Rolling Stone magazine. And Johnny is in love.

### Chapter 5

Back at home, Johnny and Terry can't find their groove again. Johnny has cleaned up his act, his tastes have changed, and his idea of fun is no longer the same. He tries to introduce Terry to Blondie and tries to get him on board with accepting his new clothing choices, inspired by Blondie. Terry makes it clear that Johnny is a drag now. Johnny gets mad at him because he had protected Terry and Stephanie from the cops, and now he is getting little in return in terms of friendship. They fight and Johnny storms off.

Johnny and his mother fight at home, and she grounds him. One morning he overhears her talking to his aunt about him. When he confronts his mother, she informs him he is being sent to South Carolina to live with his Uncle Sam. Johnny is dumbfounded and refuses to accept his mother can do this without consulting him. He calls Terry and Tessa for support, but they both seem to think it may be a good idea.

### Chapter 6

It is pouring rain when Johnny arrives in South Carolina. Uncle Sam and his eleven-year-old daughter Bug bring him to their house. Sam gives him a bedroom, much larger than his room in Tampa. Sam lays down his rules, curfew and expectations, and Johnny feels alright with this. The three of them eat supper together until Bug's mother picks her up. When Johnny and Sam are alone, they agree to watch a movie together.

Johnny starts school, using an old ten-speed bike as his transportation. His first day goes well, and he's impressed with his French teacher.

## Chapters 4-6 Analysis

This section of Johnny's story traces his transition from his life of drinking in Tampa to being on the cusp of launching a new, cleaned-up life in South Carolina. He attributes

the smoothness of the transition to having discovered Debby Harry's music. It becomes his religion, even listening to Blondie every Sunday morning, mirroring church-goers.

After his overdose, Johnny shakes off his affinity for gloom, and for the Goth interest in death. He feels lighter, less serious. He wants to embrace life by enjoying the light, not the darkness. He is still not ready to cut his ties with the life he has led for so long, and it is a difficult realization for him to see that he and Terry are moving forward in different directions. Terry is his only friend, and he feels the divide between them growing.

Johnny's resistance to moving to South Carolina is rooted in wanting to be in control of his own life. He is shocked and devastated that his mother would make such major life decisions for him at all, never mind without even bringing him into the consultation process. Once he is with Uncle Sam, though, he quickly discovers some advantages to having made the move.

Johnny is moved by seeing Bug hug her father goodbye. He realizes she is only a little girl, but he witnesses her receiving something he feels he has never had, and he aches for it.



# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary

### Chapter 7

Johnny goes through what he figures is new-guy initiation. He gets strange looks and people are distant in the cafeteria when he approaches them. His locker gets vandalized with the word fag.

Johnny recognizes there are two groups at the school: the kids who come from old money, and the kids who have screwed up and who are here to get back on track. When Johnny sees Maria, he knows she is of this second group, like him. She is tough, strong, wearing authentic high army boots. Johnny is smitten. She approaches him at his locker, and they talk. When she sees his picture of Debbie Harry, she is put-off, thinking Blondie is a disco group. Johnny tries to enlighten her but soon she walks away.

### Chapter 8

Johnny has not yet built up the courage to talk to Maria again. He is paired with Ben, a wrestler, in science, and due to Ben's squeamishness, Johnny dissects the worm by himself.

Johnny's mother sends him money, which prompts him to find a record store in town. There he buys a Blondie album, and meets Lucas, the guy at the cash register. Lucas tells Johnny to check out the Village Green, a club with live music.

On his way out of the store, he bumps into some seniors from his new school, and they call him faggot. He ignores them.

### Chapter 9

With Uncle Sam's permission, Johnny goes to the Village Green. Maria spots him right away. She explains that it is Ladies' Night, meaning that the musical lineup consists of all female cover bands. The concert is fantastic. Johnny and Maria get along, and she even warms up to the idea of Blondie.

Johnny walks Maria home, and then bikes back to Sam's place. Sam checks Johnny's breath and discovers the only thing Johnny has consumed is an Icee. During the concert, Johnny's mother called, and Sam told her that Johnny was at a friend's place, studying. Johnny is extremely grateful when he hears this.





## Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Johnny has yet to make friends at his new school, but through these chapters, he connects with Maria, Lucas and Ben. Johnny is completely hooked on Maria; he feels he can barely speak around her and that everything he says is dorky. Yet she seems to enjoy his company. Johnny's lack of confidence fades a bit over the course of the concert, as he sees that Maria really does like him.

Johnny's first visit to the record store is important; he defines himself by music, to a large extent, and vinyl records are his preference. Getting to know Lucas feels good and familiar to Johnny, as Tessa runs the record store back in Tampa.

The concert is Johnny's first night out since the night he was hospitalized, and he does not seem overly nervous about it. There is beer everywhere but he resists, in large part by focusing on running Blondie lyrics in his head. Johnny's confidence not only builds because of Maria's interest in hanging out with him; it also builds because he was able to be in a party environment, stay sober, and still have a great time.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

### Chapter 10

In Johnny's dream, Debbie Harry tells him to tell Maria his feelings. He wakes up in the middle of the night and feels it is imperative that he tell Maria right now. When he arrives at her place, he finds Ben and the two kids he saw at the record store looking into Maria's window. Johnny gets in a fight with one of them, his first physical fight ever, and soon, Maria is on the porch sending the guys away and inviting Johnny in. Maria's father works nights and her mother lives in Manhattan.

As Maria tends to his wounds, Johnny tells her he has feelings for her. Maria is surprised since she thought he was gay, along with the rest of the school. But she is happy to learn that he isn't gay, since Maria likes Johnny too. They play a few games of Scrabble, and then he heads home.

### Chapter 11

Back at school, Johnny is somewhat proud of his busted lip from the fight, though he did lie to Sam about how he got injured. After school, Johnny meets Maria at the bike racks as planned, but his bike is gone. Soon they see Brian and Donald, the guys from the other night, holding his bike, and after calling Johnny names, they throw the bike into the woods. The bike is not broken but the chain is off and a wheel rim is bent beyond use. Maria shows Johnny her bike, which turns out to be a Vespa motor scooter. They get on and Johnny holds on tight.

### Chapter 12

Maria and Johnny head to the record store. Johnny buys another Blondie album, and when Maria asks, he explains that he loves Debbie Harry's strength and beauty, that he would like to be that way sometimes.

The two move on to Goodwill shopping. Maria thinks Brian has had his fun and will now leave Johnny alone, but Johnny thinks that as long as he is hanging out with Maria, Brian will take issue with him.

Johnny tries on a pair of ladies' boots and they fit. He is going to buy them. Maria playfully makes fun of him for having such small feet. Maria spots a white dress exactly like the one Debbie Harry wears on the cover of one of her albums. Johnny has an inexplicable urge to wear the dress, but does not share the thought. Maria decides to buy the dress.



## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

As Johnny and Maria get closer, Brian and Donald emerge to give Johnny a hard time. Brian dated Maria a while back, and he doesn't like that Maria is hanging out with Johnny, particularly because he thinks that Johnny is gay. Maria feels she can handle the situation.

Over time, Johnny feels more and more comfortable with Maria. His confidence grows, and while he doesn't think he has any shot at all with her, he bravely expresses his feelings for her. He is shocked that she feels the same way. He feels good going back to school, with a fight under his belt. Johnny eventually feels comfortable enough to express to Maria that he wants to feel beautiful, strong and tough like Debbie Harry, but beautiful like her as well. Maria receives this information as if it is the most natural thing in the world.



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

### Chapter 13

Johnny is launching rockets with his cousin Bug when Maria finds them at the field. She introduces herself to Bug and then invites Johnny to come to her house later because she has something to give him.

Later, Johnny and Maria make out on Maria's bed and hold each other, fully clothed, while they listen to a Patti Smith album.

Maria then gives Johnny his gift, the Debbie Harry dress, altered so that it will fit Johnny. She encourages him to try it on. At first he has a strongly negative reaction, and he is scared she is mocking him or will judge him, but Maria is open and loving and Johnny puts on the dress. At this point, Maria sees Johnny's pain, and he cries and cries. He doesn't explain about missing his father, missing his mother, about not leading the life he should be leading. He just cries and Maria shows him in the mirror how beautiful he looks in the dress.

### Chapter 14

Johnny meets with the school counselor. At first he is reluctant and cool towards Mr. Briggs, but soon he opens up, telling him about his drinking and his feelings about his father.

Johnny then meets up with Maria under the bleachers and soon Brian, Donald and Ben are there, harassing Johnny. Ben doesn't take part, but he doesn't come to Johnny's rescue either. Maria gets angry and eventually, Brian pushes Johnny, who falls down.

Maria takes Johnny to the boys' washroom to clean him up. While she does so, she tells him about an upcoming drag contest and the top prize is \$700. Johnny doesn't know if she is having fun with him or at his expense, and Maria assures him she is being sincere. Johnny thinks of the prize money and says he'll consider it.

### Chapter 15

Johnny feels unsettled after the dress incident and his meeting with Mr. Briggs. He heads home instead of hanging out with Maria, and he is disappointed to find that Sam isn't home. He does find Bug and Sam's girlfriend Judy though, making a costume for Bug's Christmas pageant.

Johnny calls Terry but Terry cuts the conversation short, before Johnny can speak his mind. He then heads to the record store. Once there, Lucas tells Johnny that he saw Maria a few years ago at a party. She was quite drunk and messed up and she confided



in him about her absent mother and barely-present father. She sounded like she was at the end of her rope. Lucas then reassures Johnny that Maria looks a lot better and healthier now, but he does point out to be careful with her.

The next day, with some persuasion from Maria, Johnny agrees to go to Atlanta to enter the drag contest.

## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Johnny reaches new ground at this point. Maria has glimpsed a hidden facet of his personality and she gently and lovingly gives him opportunities to access it. When Maria first presents Johnny with the dress, he is offended and knocked off-kilter. But as he absorbs Maria's gesture, he finds himself willing to explore and he tries on the dress. Johnny is at his most vulnerable wearing the dress, so it is no surprise that it is in this state that he can release his emotions and cry, uninhibited, on Maria's shoulder. Previously, he handled his emotions with booze, then with Blondie, and now, this simple act of making him feel feminine, or beautiful, allows him to release the emotions that have built up over a lifetime.

Maria's suggestion to explore drag further in public, in a contest, at first puts Johnny on edge, but again, his trust for Maria wins out.

Johnny finds he wants to share, to talk and he does make some progress with Mr. Briggs, largely because Mr. Briggs seems to have an attitude of indifference. But every which way he turns, he cannot talk about his experience with the dress and the drag contest. He wants to speak to Sam, Terry, and Lucas, but it just doesn't happen.

When Lucas tells Johnny a bit about Maria's past, Johnny is surprised, though he has always surmised that Maria is someone like him, who has been messed up and is trying to sort things out. The information brings Johnny's sympathy to the forefront. Whereas in the past, Johnny identified with Maria, now he truly sees the depth of her troubles.



# Chapters 16-19

## Chapters 16-19 Summary

### Chapter 16

Johnny tries out his drag costume with Maria, with makeup, heels and a wig. Uncle Sam happens to enter his bedroom at this point, catching Johnny off-guard. Johnny is expecting fallout from him wearing a dress, but Sam just asks if Johnny is gay and assures him that he can talk to Sam about any sexual identity issues.

Later that night, Sammy tells Johnny how he reminds Sammy of Johnny's father- that they were both artistic. He describes Johnny's dad as someone off the beaten track, and Johnny realizes that his mother had a fair bit to do with him trading it all in for a suit and tie. Sammy deeply misses Johnny's dad. He tells Johnny he hopes living here isn't so bad. Johnny reflects on it and admits it is not so bad at all.

### Chapter 17

Johnny and Maria make the two and a half hour drive to Atlanta. Once inside the venue, Johnny goes backstage to prepare. He meets a Cher, a Tina Turner, a Janet Jackson. And Johnny gets into his costume to be Debbie Harry. He is very nervous.

Maria stands with Johnny in the wings as he waits for his turn. Cher is also with them, having befriended Johnny backstage earlier. When it is Johnny's turn to take the stage, he is frozen for a brief moment, but Maria gives him a push and he gets onstage. The music starts, and before he knows it, he is swept up in being 'almost' Debbie Harry. As he leaves the stage, Maria tells him how much the crowd loved him; he's done a great job. Even Cher is impressed.

### Chapter 18

While Johnny is waiting for news of the results, Anthony, the owner of the bar, sends him a drink. Johnny explains he is a recovering alcoholic, but he does talk to him. Soon Anthony has him up on the dance floor, holding Johnny close as they dance. Johnny can feel Anthony's stubble on his face. Johnny feels as if none of this is real life. Anthony has his hands all over Johnny, and when Maria sees this, she storms out.

Johnny looks everywhere for Maria and finally finds her outside. She is very upset, but she wonders if she's mad at Johnny or if she has been fooling herself. Before she can properly express her thoughts, Cher tells them the winners are being announced, so they go back inside. Cher wins the grand prize, but Johnny wins the Audience award and a \$75 gift certificate to a clothing store. As Johnny comes up on stage to collect his prize, Mr. Briggs greets him and congratulates him.

### Chapter 19



Johnny wakes up as he and Maria arrive at her place, home from the long drive from Atlanta. Maria is distraught, she expects to hear Johnny admit he is gay, but he doesn't. He tells her he was only entering the drag contest for the prize money, so Maria could get to New York to see her mother. This moves Maria. It also reassures her.

Maria asks Johnny to open the glove compartment, where he finds a pack of condoms. They go inside, make love, and fall asleep. Johnny feels perfect; it feels beautiful and right where he should be. Maria tells Johnny there is stuff in her past he doesn't know, and he sees the scars on her wrists. Maria says sometimes she feels alone. Johnny said that he, too, used to feel alone. He sneaks out as Maria's father arrives home.

## Chapters 16-19 Analysis

This group of chapters traces the trip to Atlanta. Maria wants Johnny to enter the drag contest to help him fulfill what she thinks is a dream of his. Johnny enters the contest so he can help Maria get to see her mother. They are both doing this for each other, but neither of them speak of this until they are back home.

While Johnny's motives are clear, he still manages to enjoy the process. His feet hurt from the heels, but he is not uncomfortable putting on makeup with the rest of the guys. He finds a freedom onstage that he hadn't known existed. He finds a place where he can stop being Johnny and just disappear into this world of music and performance.

Johnny is telling this story, and as he tells it, he does not mention his reaction to Anthony holding him so close on the dance floor. He does not say that he liked it and wanted to stay, nor does he say that he was feeling extremely uncomfortable. Johnny just relates the facts.

When Maria first met Johnny, she had assumed he was gay. She had been delighted to find out this was not the case, but now all of her original suspicions return. Maria feels like a fool, not only because she'd believed he was straight, but because she is the person who had encouraged him to get into this whole world of drag. But soon Johnny's love for Maria becomes clear and she feels better, so much so that she feels it is time that they have sex for the first time.



# Chapters 20-22

## Chapters 20-22 Summary

### Chapter 20

At Johnny's next appointment, Mr. Briggs wants to clear the air and asks Johnny if he's gay. He thinks he will get an honest answer now that Johnny knows Mr. Briggs is gay. Johnny truthfully says he likes women. When Mr. Briggs asks Johnny about being a transvestite, Johnny says wearing a dress is new for him and he is still figuring it out. He points out there is nothing wrong with it, and it is not having a bad impact on his life.

### Chapter 21

Maria is absent from school. Soon Johnny gets pulled out of class to see Maria's father at the office. Johnny is thinking the worst. He hides his relief when he is told Maria's mother died and Maria has gone to New York for her funeral. Her father asks Johnny to be a listening ear for Maria when she returns.

Later, Ben steps out of Biology when he is hit with nausea, and Johnny is given a pass to go check on Ben. He finds him outside hanging with Brian and Donald. Brian starts giving Johnny a hard time, and expecting a beating, Johnny runs to the school and hides in the girls' washroom, where Brian soon finds him. At a certain point, Johnny just starts laughing, and Brian slams his head into the mirror. Johnny blacks out.

### Chapter 22

Johnny is in a hospital room. His mother, Sam, Bug and a lawyer are all there. Johnny is in a neck brace and is hooked up to an IV.

The school and Brian's family want to keep the incident quiet, so they are willing to give Johnny a large cash settlement if he does not press charges. The media is interested in the story, which they classify as gay bashing.

Maria stops by and the others leave to give the couple privacy. She tells Johnny that Ben is the person who found Johnny, got him medical care, and turned in Brian and Donald. She believes that Ben saved Johnny's life. She tells Johnny that her mother was a drug addict, and that as difficult it is to lose her, at least Maria is not in a state of constant worrying anymore.

The next day, Johnny returns to Sam's place. His mother wants him to return to Florida, but Johnny fights it. Sam also points out to her that Johnny is almost a grown man and he has given Sam no trouble.





At first Johnny's mother believes he is gay, but he sets her straight. And then he tells her he is a transvestite. She is not pleased about it. Johnny also tells her he doesn't want to take any settlement money. His mother surprises him by accepting his decision.

## Chapters 20-22 Analysis

All of the exploring that Johnny has done now allows him to reflect on where he is and what he wants. When he speaks with Mr. Briggs, he allows himself to accept cross-dressing as perfectly alright. This is a shift that has happened over time.

Just at the point where everything is falling into place for Johnny, when he is starting to understand who he is and who he loves, things start to fall apart. Maria's mother dies and Johnny gets beat up. Yet at the same time, these incidents break down walls. Maria's father comes all the way to the school to break the news to Johnny of Maria's mother's death. Johnny tells his mother he is a transvestite. He also tells his mother that he loves Maria. And though the physical burden of his injuries remain, he is able to let go of a lot of the emotional baggage he's been carrying around.



# Chapters 23-25

## Chapters 23-25 Summary

### Chapter 23

It is Bug's Christmas pageant. She is wearing the Sally Ride costume that was mainly created by Maria. Sam's girlfriend Judy had wanted Bug to be Betsy Ross, but she wanted to be Sally Ride the first American woman in space. Johnny and Maria had supported her decision, and now is the big day. When Johnny and Maria step outside of the auditorium for a smoke, they run into Ben. It is a bit awkward. Johnny thanks Ben for having helped him, and acknowledges it must have been tough for Ben to turn in his friend.

Later, Johnny goes to the record store, where Lucas gives him a Christmas present. It is the new Blondie single. The name of the song is Maria.

### Chapter 24

Sam gives Johnny his Christmas present, before Johnny heads to Florida to see his mom for the holidays. It is Johnny's father's old record collection- Glam rock- and a trunk full of his old belongings- satin pants, shiny tops, makeup. Johnny is amazed. That night, Johnny puts on his dad's clothes and listens to one of his albums.

### Chapter 25

Johnny says goodbye to Maria before he heads back to Florida for the winter break. She hands him his present. They share a tender goodbye. On the train, Johnny opens the box from Maria and finds a note that its contents once belonged to Debbie Harry. The box contains a pair of high heels decorated with rhinestones. Not caring if people see him or not, Johnny tries them on.

## Chapters 23-25 Analysis

Johnny more and more readily accepts who he is, and there is encouragement at every turn. Bug had not settled for being Betsy Ross; she had held out to be Sally Ride and it had been the right choice. Lucas has heard of what has been going on and he is supportive of Johnny. And Sam shows him who his father used to be. Sam is so touched that Johnny is sticking to his beliefs and being true to himself. It reminds him of Johnny's dad. Johnny's discovery that his dad liked flashy clothing and makeup brings him a new sense of validation. And finally, Maria's gift is a sign of support, that she loves Johnny for who he is.



# Characters

## Johnny

Johnny is sixteen years old. The past few years have been rough since his father died, and he had to step up and keep the household running while his mother slipped into a depression. The stress got to him and he developed a drinking habit, which he has now kicked.

Johnny makes sense of his world through music. Growing up, he had been into Goth, but he has since discovered Blondie. Johnny is sensitive and he longs to be strong and tough like Debbie Harry. He is in love with his girlfriend Maria, and over the course of the story, he discovers that he likes dressing up as a woman; he wants to feel beautiful.

Johnny is a good kid and he is used to being harassed at school. He takes it all in stride and doesn't let it get to him personally.

## Tessa

Tessa is Johnny's babysitter as he is growing up. She introduces him to The Cure, Morrissey, and other rock bands. Tessa dances with Johnny and they have fun together. He is not sure if he sees her more as a crush or a sister.

Tessa ends up marrying the guy who runs the bookstore. She is at the club the night Johnny takes an overdose. Johnny calls Tessa when his mother wants to send him to South Carolina, hoping Tessa will intervene on his behalf, but she thinks the change will be good for him.

## Johnny's dad

Johnny's dad

Johnny's father dies when Johnny is 12 years old. He falls asleep at the wheel and crashes into a bus full of seniors. Johnny remembers that he was gone most of the time. When he was present, he was quiet, and he liked talk-radio. There wasn't much sign of personality.

When Johnny lives with Sam, he learns that his dad used to be a free spirit, artistic and creative. He liked glam rock, he was popular with the girls, and he was a lot of fun. He gave it all up to become a husband and dad.



## Johnny's mom

Johnny's mother is devastated when her husband dies. She withdraws from the world and goes into a four-year depression, leaving Johnny to fend for himself. When she emerges, she becomes religious. She cares for Johnny but after his stay in rehab, she feels she does not have the skills required to manage him. Thinking of his best interest, she sends him to South Carolina to stay with his Uncle Sam.

Johnny's mother tries to understand who her son is, and ultimately, she only wants him to be happy.

## Terry

Terry is Johnny's friend pre-rehab. They drink a lot and always hang out together. Terry is also into hard drugs, which Johnny has avoided. When Johnny comes home from rehab, he and Terry no longer have much common ground and their friendship becomes strained.

## Maria

Maria is Johnny's girlfriend in South Carolina. She has had a rough past, like Johnny. Her mother, who lives in New York, is a drug addict, and Maria herself used to drink quite a bit. She also has scars on her wrists from what is implied as previous suicide attempts. Maria is strong and tough and gentle and funny all at the same time. She cares deeply for Johnny, and she's always up for a bit of fun. Like Johnny, she has done a fair bit of growing up all by herself.

When Maria meets Johnny, she really likes him romantically but she thinks he is gay. She is relieved when she finds out he is straight, and quite happy he is interested in her. Maria wants Johnny to explore who he really is, although she sometimes feels foolish for having done so. When she is at the contest with Johnny, she feels she has just been trying to convince herself that Johnny is straight because that is what she wants to believe. Ultimately, though, Maria understands that Johnny has many facets of his personality, and that he wants to be with her, and that his interest in dressing as a woman does not change that.

## Uncle Sam

Uncle Sam is Johnny's dad's brother. Johnny moves in with him and his daughter Bug. He is divorced from Bug's mother. Sam is open with Johnny. He wants Johnny to feel at home and supported by him.

Johnny's mother has a rough history with Sam. He had been unhappy when his brother married her, because Sam felt that Johnny's mother prevented him from being who he



really was. Sam sees his brother reflected in Johnny, and he is so proud of Johnny when he sees him embracing who he really is.

## Bug

Bug is Sam's daughter, Johnny's cousin. She is eleven years old. She is fascinated by science and rockets in particular. Bug does not like being at her mother's place and prefers spending time with her dad. Bug is not a fan of her mother's new boyfriend or her father's girlfriend.

## Brian

Brian is Maria's ex-boyfriend. He is extremely jealous that now Maria is with Johnny and he has no trouble taking out his anger on Johnny. He is mean and a bully. He is usually with his sidekicks, Donald and Ben. Brian is not present in the story except when he is antagonizing Johnny.

## Mr. Briggs

Mr. Briggs is the school guidance counselor. He is not patronizing and he is careful not to show too much false concern. Johnny meets with him to discuss his staying sober, his father, and his sexuality. When Johnny goes to Atlanta for the contest, Mr. Briggs, surprisingly, is there. The next time they meet for an appointment, Mr. Briggs hopes that now that Johnny knows his own secret, maybe Johnny will open up about being gay. Johnny is straight and says so, but he does open up about liking to dress like a woman.

## Ben

Ben hangs out with Brian and Donald. He is Johnny's lab partner and he always gets woozy if he has to deal with dissecting animals. When his friends give Johnny a hard time, Ben doesn't join in but he doesn't stop things either, until the major beating, when Ben turns his friends in and gets help for Johnny.



# Objects/Places

## 7-Eleven

Johnny hangs out at the 7-Eleven with Terry in their Goth makeup and clothing. They get harassed by students who are in Tampa as tourists. Johnny and Terry spend time in the parking lot, a place for those who don't feel they belong anywhere else.

## Alcohol

Johnny becomes an alcoholic at an extremely young age. After his drug overdose, he is sent to rehab and he subsequently stays sober. Alcohol has a negative effect on Johnny's life and he works hard to stay clear of it. Johnny's mother also drank excessively during her depression. Though Maria doesn't drink when Johnny meets her, she has a history of drinking.

## Tampa

Johnny grows up in Tampa, Florida. He has a regular life there until his father dies when Johnny turns 12. He then spends four years raising himself while his mother's depression shifts all of the household burdens to himself. After Johnny goes through rehab, his mother thinks it is for the best that Johnny moves in with his Uncle Sam in South Carolina.

## South Carolina

Johnny is forced to move to South Carolina to live with his Uncle Sam. While he is there, Johnny grows a lot and when his mother urges Johnny to move home, he says he would prefer to stay with his uncle. Things in South Carolina aren't that different for Johnny in terms of school, since he is made fun of as a 'faggot' just as he was at home. But here he meets Maria, and he is not ready to leave her.

## High-Heel Shoes

High-heel shoes are strictly a woman's shoe, so it is a big step when Johnny agrees to wear stilettos for the contest. He feels brave in walking around with these shoes, even though they hurt his feet.

Maria's gift to Johnny is a pair of Debbie Harry's high heel shoes, and Johnny now feels that they can rightfully be his.



## Rockets

Bug is fascinated with rockets and space. One day she launches rockets with Johnny. Rockets symbolize exploration of the unknown, of leaving behind the safety of the ground and reaching far for what we really believe in. This truth factors strongly in Johnny's journey as he makes his own explorations of his identity, despite his fear of what he will find.

## Atlanta

The drag contest is held in Atlanta. Johnny and Maria feel comfortable there because they are so far from home. They bump into Mr. Briggs at the contest. The contest feels like a surreal situation, where reality isn't quite reality. Johnny finds a freedom at the contest while he is on stage performing dressed as Debbie Harry.

## Drugs

Johnny stays away from drugs even though his friend Terry is a heavy user. Johnny feels that alcohol is a safer, legal way to get the buzz he is looking for. It is unfortunate that their friend Stephanie gives Johnny ecstasy, since it causes an overdose and he nearly dies and gets rushed to the hospital as a result. The silver lining is that this leads to his rehab.

## Rehab

Johnny's rush to the hospital leads to his time in rehab. He enjoys being there. At first he tries to go along with the program just to get along, but as time goes on, he finds he means more and more of what he says and his desire to be clean is sincere. He also discovers Debbie Harry while he is in rehab.

## Music

The one element in Johnny's life that acts as a drug, a solace, a friend, a method of expression, and an aid in processing his emotions is music. At first Johnny is exposed to The Cure by his babysitter Tessa, but she also exposes him to his mother's Beatles albums. As a teenager, Johnny finds dark gloomy music concerned with death interesting to him, and it goes within a larger package of being and dressing Goth. When Johnny sobers up, he wants to find a lighter side of life, and this is what he finds in the music of Blondie. When he receives his father's albums, he discovers glam music like David Bowie. All styles of music are just ways of people attempting to express themselves, and Johnny finds that when he finds the music of Debbie Harry.



# Themes

## Discovering Identity

Debbie Harry Sings in French explores an adolescent boy's journey in discovering his own identity. Due to his slight build and his Goth style, Johnny has always been teased as gay, but he has never felt attracted to men.

Johnny mentions wanting to feel beautiful and strong like Debbie Harry, so Maria gives Johnny the opportunity to explore trying on a woman's dress. Maria's support of this is central to Johnny allowing himself the exploration. Even in the dress, he doesn't immediately recognize that this is what he wants to be. Maria encourages him to take a second opportunity to dress like a woman, this time in front of other people. The first person to see him, aside from Maria, is Sam. The accidental meeting goes much better than Johnny could expect, and Johnny does not walk away from it feeling embarrassed at all. When Johnny gets on stage, he loses all of his inhibitions and he embraces the feeling of playing out this fantasy of being - almost being - Debbie Harry.

Johnny is confused by his enjoyment of this but over time he gets comfortable with the idea, enough to tell Mr. Briggs, and eventually his mother. Once he accepts and recognizes that he is a transvestite, it is easier for him to share this news.

There is a motif in the novel of getting into a costume to become someone else in order to become yourself. Johnny becomes himself when he is playing the part of Debbie Harry, and similarly Bug wears her Sally Ride costume proudly, having stuck to her guns.

## Addiction

Addiction is prevalent in this novel. Johnny is an alcoholic, Terry is addicted to drugs, Maria's mother dies from being a drug addict. They all have different outcomes. Johnny grapples with his addiction by focusing on Debbie Harry and Maria. When he is in an area with alcohol, he thinks about them almost as a mantra.

Addiction in this novel is not only about substance abuse: Johnny's mother becomes addicted to her grief. Johnny is addicted to Debbie Harry. Even Brian is addicted to his bullying ways.

## Bullying

Brian and Donald show little or no respect for Johnny, and hardly more for Maria. Brian thinks that he has a voice in Maria's life and that he can intervene. He is arrogant and mean. All of this is coming from a place of hurt, because he wishes Maria would be with





him. And he is even more hurt that she is with someone else. That he thinks Johnny is gay even upsets him more.

Johnny almost exclusively handles the bullying by just brushing it off and remembering not to take it personally. Even Maria gets more ruffled by the bullying than Johnny does. Johnny understands that the anger being expressed has little to do with him personally. Johnny does not feel the need to clarify to the world that he is not gay, since he shouldn't be bullied about it even if he is gay.



# Style

## Point of View

Debbie Harry Sings in French is told from the first person singular point of view, in the voice of Johnny, a sixteen year old boy discovering his identity. Johnny relates his story once it has already happened, so he is looking back.

Because the facts are presented by Johnny, he also records his thoughts and feelings along the way. Everything described is subjective; there is no objective voice in the book.

## Setting

Johnny grows up in a house in Tampa, Florida. When his mother's depression results in the loss of her job, they move to a smaller, more affordable place.

Johnny then lives in South Carolina with his uncle, in a home much larger than the one he left behind in Florida.

The events in the novel occur over the summer break through the first semester of the school year.

## Language and Meaning

The novel Debbie Harry Sings in French is dripping with pop-culture references, from Nintendo 64 (a video game console) to the movie Interview with a Vampire to the music references. Cell phones, internet and social networking are noticeably absent, since this all occurs in an era preceding our modern technology.

Johnny speaks simply, from the heart. He is not always direct, but he is not poetic or flowery with his words. His vocabulary accurately reflects his age.

## Structure

Debbie Harry Sings in French is divided into twenty-five short chapters. The first chapter fills in the backstory of Johnny's early life, and then his father's death and his mother's depression. The next three chapters cover Johnny in Tampa at sixteen years old, before, during and after the night of his overdose, and into recovery. The rest of the novel explores Johnny's reality in South Carolina.

## Quotes

"Me, I was strictly a booze guy. It was easier to get, cheaper, and less trouble if you got caught." (Ch. 2, p. 12)

"I guess I should have been pissed off, but I was kind of relieved in a way. Nobody should be an alcoholic before the age of seventeen." (Ch. 3, p. 31)

"I didn't see anything but a skinny, short-haired kid who'd gone bad somehow, a package she didn't want, being returned to sender." (Ch. 5, p. 48)

"There was Uncle Sam, an old guy in a flannel shirt, and me, a kid in a skinny necktie, and both of us were doing the same thing - trying to pretend we weren't lonely as hell." (Ch. 6, p. 59)

"I felt loose and free, like when you're a little kid and you spin yourself dizzy until you can't stand up anymore." (Ch. 9, p. 80)

"I felt like I'd been somewhere, like I'd been gone for a long time and I'd been running the whole way. My lips felt numb. I was shaking a little. It was the most drunk I'd been since I'd stopped drinking." (Ch. 13, p. 118-9)

"And after I hugged her, she looked at me like I was some kinda alien. She said nobody had fucking hugged her in forever, and she just started bawling. It was the saddest damn thing I ever saw." (Ch. 15, p. 146)

"But I don't hate myself or anything. I'm doing better, right? My grades are ok. I'm not getting into trouble. So what's wrong with putting on a dress once in a while?" (Ch. 20, p. 191)

"How am I supposed to be myself when I'm pretending to be somebody else?" Bug looked up at Maria. Maria looked over at me." (Ch. 23, p. 217)



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Tessa and what is her relationship to Johnny? What does she do while she is with Johnny? What does Johnny learn from her? How does their dynamic evolve over time? Are there times when Tessa fails Johnny? Why?

What happens to Johnny's mother after his father dies? How does she cope with her grief? How do you feel about what she did? How did Johnny change from the experience?

Why are Terry and Johnny friends? Why does it shift after rehab? Is somebody to blame for the gulf that grows between them? What does Johnny love about Terry? What does he dislike about Terry?

What happens the night Johnny and Terry go to the club? How does Johnny get to the hospital? What happens as a result of going to the hospital? What would Johnny's life be like today had he not had that overdose?

What does Johnny discover in rehab? How does he feel when he gets out and is back at home? What is his relationship with his mother at that point? Why does she send him to South Carolina? How does he feel about that?

How is Johnny's life in South Carolina different than back in Florida? Who are his friends? What is his home life like? Where do you think he is better off? Would Johnny have found himself had he stayed in Florida? What would have been the result?

How does Johnny feel about women? Is he in love with Maria? What draws him to Debbie Harry? What does he want to feel that he can't access as a typical male? Is Johnny gay?

What does Johnny learn about himself and his sexuality? How does Maria feel about it? How does Mr. Briggs feel about it? Uncle Sam? Johnny's mother? How does Johnny feel about it?

What does Johnny discover about his father? Does this help him come to peace with who he is? Why did his father package that part of him away? How did it affect his personality and his life? How will Johnny's life be different than his father's life? Why does Sam say Johnny's father would be so proud of him?