

# **Dork Diaries: Tales From a Not-So-Fabulous Life Study Guide**

**Dork Diaries: Tales From a Not-So-Fabulous Life by Rachel Renee Russell**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

# Contents

|  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| <a href="#">Dork Diaries: Tales From a Not-So-Fabulous Life 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="#">Pages 1 – 61.....</a>  | <a href="#">5</a>  |
| <a href="#">Pages 62 – 118.....</a>  | <a href="#">8</a>  |
| <a href="#">Pages 119 – 175.....</a>   | <a href="#">10</a> |
| <a href="#">Pages 176 – 228.....</a>   | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">Pages 229 - 282.....</a>   | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>  | <a href="#">18</a> |
| <a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>                                       | <a href="#">22</a> |
| <a href="#">Settings.....</a>  | <a href="#">25</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>   | <a href="#">27</a> |
| <a href="#">Styles.....</a>  | <a href="#">32</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>  | <a href="#">33</a> |

# Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, this study guide is divided up according to page numbers. Quotes are attributed as such. This guide specifically refers to the 2009 First Aladdin/Simon and Schuster edition.

“Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” is a young adult novel by Rachel Renee Russell which recounts 14-year-old Nikki Maxwell’s first month and-a-half in a new school where she must handle bullies, boys, and an art competition. The novel begins shortly before Nikki is set to begin school at Westchester Day School. Her father, an exterminator, has secured a contract to handle the school, and a scholarship for Nikki to attend the school.

Nikki, though she is embarrassed as to how she is able to be attending the wealthy school, is determined to make the year as good as she can. She wants to buy an iPhone and a designer wardrobe, both of which she believes will make her popular. However, her mother will not buy her an iPhone or a designer wardrobe. She buys Nikki a diary instead. At first, Nikki is disgusted, but then decides the diary is the perfect place to write down her thoughts and feelings – even though it will not be publicized on the internet.

At school, Nikki is not the only new girl. MacKenzie Hollister, gorgeous and utterly cruel, also begins attending Westchester Day. She instantly becomes popular, attracts a clique of friends, and begins to make fun of all other girls for their outfits, fashion, and appearance. She soon sets her sights on Nikki, especially when she discovers that Nikki also wants to enter the Avant-Garde Art Competition at the beginning of October. Panicked, Nikki signs up to be a Library Shelving Assistant instead, hoping to avoid MacKenzie’s cruelty.

Working in the library, Nikki meets and befriends Chloe and Zoey, two girls who love reading and who hate MacKenzie. Chloe and Zoey reveal that whatever assistants distinguish themselves the most for the librarian, Mrs. Peach, will be taken on a field trip to New York for National Library Week. The girls believe that tattoos about reading will propel them to the top of the list. When the parents of Chloe and Zoey say no to tattoos, they plan to run away and hide out in New York. This worries Nikki.

Nikki’s little sister, Brianna, annoys Nikki at breakfast by drawing a face on her hand. This gives Nikki the idea of drawing temporary tattoos on Chloe and Zoey – which in turn prevents them from running away. Word soon gets out that Nikki can draw tattoos. Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey then begin a project where charitable book donations will earn a person a tattoo. The girls instantly become popular, which goes to the heads of Chloe and Zoey. They overbook Nikki, and begin to argue with her about not being able to keep up with tattoo appointments. Nikki finally has enough and quits.

Through it all, only Brandon, a cute and kind boy, stands by Nikki, whether it is against MacKenzie or against the student body. He ends up being the only person to stand by

Nikki on her worst day ever. She is late to school, must catch a ride with her dad in his exterminator van, her entry to the art competition is accidentally destroyed, and MacKenzie cruelly mocks her for her dad's job and her ruined painting. Nikki is drenched in the rain, and Brandon appears with an umbrella to walk her inside. When Nikki sees graffiti on her locker, calling her "Bug Girl", she has had enough. She runs to the office to call her parents to pick her up.

Nikki convinces her parents to let her transfer schools. They go in early the next day to complete paperwork. Nikki goes past the art displays to see who has won, and is stunned to see a composition of black-and-white photos of the tattoos she has created, along with a sign marking her as the artist, and the first-place ribbon. She decides not to transfer schools, knowing she has friends after all.

She learns that Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey, upon hearing about her worst day ever, came together to make sure that Nikki would still be entered in the competition. Brandon took photos of many of the tattoos she created, to let those be the entry. Chloe and Zoey apologize for taking advantage of Nikki, making sure Nikki knows their friendship with her is what truly matters. Nikki gladly forgives them and thanks them. She is also thrilled when Brandon asks to be her lab partner in Biology. She has come to admire Brandon for his confidence: he doesn't care what anyone else thinks of him. The only opinion that matters is his own. Nikki knows she herself needs to learn to be this way.

# Pages 1 – 61

## Summary

As the summer ends, 14-year-old Nikki Maxwell asks her mother for an iPhone before going to middle school at Westchester Country Day. She hopes it will help put her in the CCP – the Cute, Cool, and Popular – group at school. Her old cell phone – purchased off eBay – is an embarrassment. It has been impossible for Nikki, an artist, to save up money for a phone because she spends all of her money on art supplies. Instead of an iPhone, Nikki's mom buys her a diary. Nikki is stunned because no one writes in diaries anymore, but posts everything about themselves online. Nikki says it is the worst present ever, and will never write in the diary again.

A few days later, Nikki writes in her diary again. She feels invisible at her new school. Not a single person says hello to her. She has no idea how she will fit in. She is only attending Westchester because her dad has landed an extermination contract with them, and because they have given her a scholarship.

In Honors English Lit, Nikki reads Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream", which she finds to be surprising and weird, considering it teen chick lit. She stays up late doing homework when she hears a knock on her door. It is usually her 6-year-old sister, Brianna, afraid to use the bathroom alone at night because she thinks the tooth fairy will come to take all her teeth out. This is because Nikki told her the tooth fairy is mad at her for burying her teeth in the backyard.

Instead of Brianna, it is their mom and dad who ask about school. Nikki bursts into tears. They try to comfort Nikki, calling her "little Boo-Boo", which makes her feel worse. Her father suggests posting positive affirmations around the house. Nikki thinks this is a stupid idea, but doesn't say so.

"That's So Hot!", a magazine, says that friends, fun, fashion, and flirting are keys to happiness. Nikki has a locker next to the gorgeous new girl, MacKenzie Hollister. Nikki feels like a loser next to her. MacKenzie has no trouble making friends, who all congregate around her locker, making it hard for Nikki to get to her locker. This causes MacKenzie and the other girls to be annoyed with Nikki. However, like the popular girls, Nikki enjoys using lip gloss. She hopes a boy like Brandon Roberts, who sits in front of her in biology, will develop a huge crush on her due to her glossy lips. Brandon is a quiet rebel, a reporter and photographer for the school paper.

MacKenzie and her friends cruelly comment on the style and attractiveness of any girl who comes near. Nikki thinks she needs a new designer wardrobe to fit in. However, she knows that an outfit can look totally different on two similar girls – one popular and the other unpopular. Nikki determines that once she has new clothes, she will tell MacKenzie and her group off.

Nikki's parents have posted 139 sticky notes with positive affirmations on them around the house, including one in the toaster which catches on fire. Nikki considers moving back to the city and living with her grandma in order to attend her old school. Her grandma is sweet but wacky, obsessed with the game show "The Price is Right" and wanting to write a guidebook for contestants. She is also taking hip-hop dance lessons. She tells Nikki it is up to her whether she is a chicken or a champion.

The Random Acts of Avant-Garde Art, with a \$500 first prize, is announced at school. Nikki wants to enter, and is surprised to see MacKenzie entering as well. Terrified of MacKenzie, Nikki signs up instead to be a Library Shelving Assistant (LSA) with Mrs. Peach and two other girls. A few days later, MacKenzie hands out birthday invitations. Everyone seems very excited, except Brandon Roberts. This annoys MacKenzie but makes Nikki happy. Nikki considers falling in love with Brandon.

## Analysis

"Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life" is a young adult novel by Rachel Renee Russell which recounts 14-year-old Nikki Maxwell's first month and-a-half in a new school where she must handle bullies, boys, and an art competition. When the novel begins, Nikki is beginning a new school where she knows no one, and where she hopes to be popular and have many friends. She believes an iPhone and a fancy wardrobe will ensure this for her – yet it also sets the stage for the theme of coming of age.

Nikki is a sweet and kind 14-year-old girl who places emphasis on all the wrong things at the start. Clothes, technology, and popularity are things which she believes will lead to her happiness. She is very much concerned about what the other kids at school will think about her, especially because she is not wealthy, because her father is an exterminator, and because she is attending the school on a scholarship.

It is through the scholarship that the theme of family comes into play. Nikki's father works very hard to support his family, and his winning contract with the school makes it possible for his daughter to receive a scholarship for a better education than would otherwise be had in public school. When they learn that Nikki is having a difficult time in school, they comfort her and decide to post positive affirmations around the house. Nikki finds this a bit childish, but is still comforted to some degree by their concern.

Nikki's unhappiness at school stems mainly from two things. First, her desire to quickly make friends has resulted in not a single person even saying hello to her. Second, MacKenzie appears as an antagonist to Nikki, and a bully to the school at large. MacKenzie is callous, cruel, and spares no expense to make fun of other kids in school, especially other girls. It is through MacKenzie that bullying becomes an important theme in the novel.

MacKenzie herself appears to have no problem making friends – at least a small clique of popular girls who masquerade as friends. Everyone wants to be MacKenzie's friend,



but MacKenzie is highly selective. As a result, not only does Nikki feel bullied by MacKenzie – but she feels absolutely inferior to MacKenzie because Nikki has no friends herself.

It causes Nikki to want to change schools, and leads to a phone conversation with her grandmother. She asks her grandmother about changing schools, and the theme of family once again reemerges through the advice Nikki is given. Her grandmother tells her that she can either be a chicken or a champion, to have courage, or give in to fear. Nikki has already demonstrated courage by attending a new school where she has no one, but whether or not she will have courage to stick it out becomes thematically questionable through the rest of the novel.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Nikki attending Westchester Day School? Why is she so nervous about attending? How does she decide to handle the transition to the new school?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Nikki want to be popular? What does she think being popular will entail? What does she think will make her popular? Do you agree or disagree with her understanding of popularity? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does Nikki's grandmother mean when she tells Nikki that she can either be a chicken or a champion?

## **Vocabulary**

cruddy, hordes, clinically, reputation, principality, mischievous, protagonist, plagiarizes, constitutional, affirmations, entourage, senile, queasy, epiphany, extracurricular, immobilized, dissected, putrid

## Pages 62 – 118

### Summary

The two girls that Nikki will be working the library with are Chloe Garcia and Zoeysha “Zoey” Ebony Franklin, two very girly-girls who are excited that Nikki will be working with them. Chloe’s family owns a software company, and Chloe loves to read. Zoey’s dad is a record company executive while her mom is an attorney. Zoey also loves to read. Neither girl likes MacKenzie, but they take a quick liking to Nikki. They laugh about MacKenzie, which catches MacKenzie’s attention across the lunch room for a split second.

MacKenzie gives Nikki a birthday invitation on Friday, September 13. Nikki is stunned when she begins to open the invitation. It turns out the invitation is not for Nikki, but for a girl sitting near Nikki named Jessica. Nikki is humiliated, and Jessica is angry. Nikki intends to spend her Saturday in bed, but she is told to come outside for a family barbecue instead. When Nikki’s dad tries to kill some wasps, he only makes them angry. The cookout ends with McDonald’s.

On Monday, during a math test, Nikki copies an answer from Andrea Snarkowski, which ensures Nikki gets an A on the test. She wins the Student of the Month Award for her work, and her picture is shown in the community newspaper. In class, MacKenzie glares at Nikki. Nikki then decides to enter the art contest. She catches MacKenzie spying on her. MacKenzie then pretends to accidentally squirt water on Nikki from a water fountain.

At lunch, Jessica trips Nikki when she walks past her table. Nikki trips, falls, and gets food all over her. MacKenzie asks Nikki if she is having a nice trip. Nikki is humiliated and begins to cry. As she looks up, she sees Brandon. He asks her if she is okay, helps her up, hands her a napkin, and their fingers briefly touch. Nikki is thrilled. MacKenzie looks enraged. She and Jessica continue to make fun of Nikki, who seeks shelter in the janitor’s closet. Chloe and Zoey come to see if Nikki is alright. Zoey gives Nikki a sweater to wear, and Chloe gives Nikki some new lip gloss.

### Analysis

The theme of friendship is front and center through this section of the novel. Nikki befriends Chloe and Zoey, having unintentionally signed up to be a Library Shelving Assistant. When Jessica cruelly trips Nikki while she is walking through the cafeteria, it is Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey who comes to Nikki’s side, giving her a sweater and lip gloss to help put her back together. If not for Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey, it is likely that no one would have been around to comfort Nikki.

It is now no longer just MacKenzie, but MacKenzie’s friends – including Jessica – who are bullying Nikki at this point. MacKenzie and Jessica humiliate Nikki when Nikki





accidentally opens an invitation intended instead for Jessica. The bullying becomes so bad that Nikki runs to hide in the janitor's closet to actually physically escape. Fortunately, Chloe and Zoey come to comfort Nikki.

The friendship between Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey isn't based on popularity, wealth, fancy clothes, or technology, but because the three girls simply like one another. They enjoy each other's company, and enjoy spending time with each other. They don't have to pretend to be anything fancy, or try to impress one another. They can simply be who they are around each other. It is something that Nikki still has to come to understand, but she does not yet realize the importance of being comfortable with herself as this stage in the novel.

Nikki's family is also there to comfort her. Nikki wants to spend her entire Saturday in bed in order to forget the events of the past week. But her family refuses to let her mope around, and get her to come outside for a barbecue. Even though the barbecue ends in disaster, the love that Nikki's family has for her is apparent in their refusal to let her be alone in such a trying time.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe the friendship between Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey. What is this friendship like? What is it based on? How does the friendship benefit each of the girls? Why is it especially important for Nikki?

## Discussion Question 2

How do MacKenzie and Jessica ratchet up the level of bullying they direct toward Nikki? How does Nikki react? How do Chloe and Zoey react to Nikki's being bullied? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

After Nikki is tripped in the cafeteria, she is first helped out by Brandon. Why does this excite Nikki so much? Why does it anger MacKenzie so much?

## Vocabulary

vicariously, snazzy, integrity, sashayed, chivalrous, projectile

## Pages 119 – 175

### Summary

On the way home, Nikki finds a hearing aid that she thinks belongs to Mrs. Wallabanger next door. Attempts to return the hearing aid don't go well, however, as Mrs. Wallabanger believes that Nikki is saying "hairy legs". For social studies, Nikki uses a camera to film her social studies project on recycling to make it appear as if the hearing aid is a fancy cell phone earpiece like the one that MacKenzie owns. Unfortunately, Nikki is allergic to spray paint which she uses to coat the earpiece, leading to a rash. Nikki then returns the hearing aid to Mrs. Wallabanger anonymously. She later sees Mrs. Wallabanger wearing the hearing aid and smiling.

Nikki's rash does not go away. She mixes up a batch of fake vomit to use to encourage her mom to let her stay home from school. Her family finds the rest of the fake vomit on the stove – and believe it is breakfast. Nikki then enjoys her day off.

On Monday, Mrs. Peach announces that she will be bringing six LSAs on a five-day field trip to the New York City Public Library for National Library Week. Chloe and Zoey are thrilled. It is exciting to Nikki, but not as exciting as if they would be meeting celebrities rather than authors. Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey wonder how they can stand out against the other LSAs. Chloe suggests making pro-reading tattoos will demonstrate how serious they are. Zoey loves the idea. Nikki likes the idea, but is unsure about it. However, Chloe and Zoey's parents say no to tattoos.

Chloe and Zoey are planning to run away to New York to live in the underground tunnels until Library Week. Nikki does not want this to happen, so she needs to come up with a plan. At breakfast, Brianna draws a face on her hand and annoys Nikki with it. Yet, it helps to give Nikki an idea. She leaves notes on the lockers of Chloe and Zoey to meet her in the janitor's closet. There, she explains she will be giving them temporary tattoos. They are thrilled and decide not to run away.

### Analysis

Despite having friends, Nikki is still unhappy with the fact that she is not popular the way that MacKenzie is. This compels her to want to create a faux-earpiece for a phone, thinking the technology will help her to become popular. Here, ground from which Nikki must grow is demonstrated in her ceaseless desire to be popular. She has much ground to cover still to come of age. It is clear that there is no middle ground for Nikki at this point: she is either popular, or she might as well not exist.

Clearly, Nikki is almost taking her friendship with Chloe and Zoey for granted; however, this is not the case for long. Nikki quickly realizes that Chloe and Zoey mean a lot to her, and the thought of them running away to New York to await Library Week is too much for her to bear. Because of the annoying antics of Brianna, Nikki is given the idea of



drawing fake tattoos on Chloe and Zoey – and preventing them from running away to New York.

Here, both family and friendship can be seen to influence Nikki in very important ways. Beyond Chloe and Zoey being there for Nikki following her cafeteria encounter with Jessica, Chloe and Zoey's impromptu plans to run away to New York make Nikki realize how much they actually do mean to her. She feels as if she fits in with them, and as if she is accepted with them. This doesn't exactly derail her desire to be popular, but it does make her realize she has friends.

Interestingly enough, the theme of courage can be seen subtly in this section of the novel. It takes courage on the part of Nikki to deal with the bullying tactics of MacKenzie and her friends, but it also takes courage of Chloe and Zoey not to fall in line with MacKenzie. They are just as likely to be targets for MacKenzie as Nikki is, but their friendship with Nikki – and their dislike of MacKenzie – seems to defy fears of being bullied.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Nikki spray paint Mrs. Wallabanger's earpiece? What does Nikki hope this will accomplish for her in the long run?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Nikki so concerned about the idea that Chloe and Zoey want to run away to New York? Why do they want to run away? Why does Nikki want to stop them? How is she finally able to convince them not to go? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Despite having good friends in Chloe and Zoey, and despite a friendship clearly forming with Brandon, Nikki continues to emphasize the need for, and importance of popularity. Why? What begins to change her mind about this? How?

## Vocabulary

hyperventilated, technique, exhilarating, ironies, faux

## Pages 176 – 228

### Summary

In school, Nikki notices that she and Brandon often seem to be looking and smiling at each other. In Biology, they are partners. Nikki is thrilled whenever Brandon talks to her for any reason, including biology work. Returning at book at the library later, Brandon sees Nikki drawing tattoo designs and compliments her. He tells her he hopes she enters the art competition. Nikki says she isn't sure because MacKenzie is entering, but Brandon tells Nikki she has more talent than MacKenzie. Nikki is thrilled. As he leaves, Chloe and Zoey are stunned, and Nikki admits to them she has a crush on Brandon.

Nikki takes Brianna to a children's movie at their mother's request. The theater is full of screaming children. Afterwards, Nikki and Brianna are picked up by their father in his extermination van so he can do an emergency job on the way home. Nikki is highly embarrassed. They arrive at a huge, beautiful house, and Brianna announces she has to use the bathroom. The kind owner directs Nikki and Brianna to the upstairs bathroom. They find an amazing bedroom and bathroom obviously belonging to a teenage girl. Brianna takes her time – allowing Nikki to realize the bedroom belongs to MacKenzie, who can be heard complaining about the infestation.

Nikki encourages Brianna to hide or the tooth fairy will get her. Brianna rebels, going after MacKenzie and accusing her of being the tooth fairy. Brianna kicks MacKenzie, who runs downstairs thinking that her little sister's friends are running wild. Nikki takes the opportunity to grab Brianna and rush out of the house. They leap into their dad's van, just as he is finishing up and preparing to leave. Nikki knows her day has not been worth ten bucks.

The end of September rolls around. The art competition nears. She decides to enter the watercolor painting she gave to her parents for their wedding anniversary. They have it displayed in an expensive frame. Her mom tells her to take good care of it.

At school on Monday, MacKenzie shows up on crutches. The rumor is that her shin was injured while scuba-diving with a ninth grader, occurring when she saved his life. At lunch, Nikki begins drawing tattoos on Chloe and Zoey. The most popular boy in school, president of the student council, Jason Feldman sits down at their table to watch. He is impressed, and asks what one has to do to get a tattoo.

Chloe and Zoey are stunned, and put together a sign-up sheet. A book donation gets a tattoo. Jason signs up and encourages his friends Ryan Crenshaw and Matt Thompson to do the same. Chloe, and Zoey are very excited, but Nikki is worried. Seven more guys sign up and a huge crowd forms to watch. The only people who do not join are MacKenzie and her CCP friends. Nikki, Chloe and Zoey decide to call their project the "Ink Exchange". Brandon is impressed, and wants to interview Nikki for the paper.

## Analysis

As the novel continues, friendship remains an important theme as Chloe and Zoey become recipients of temporary tattoos drawn by Nikki to help them in their quest to get to go to National Library Week. While Nikki is able to keep them from going to New York alone, it has very bad consequences otherwise.

When the other kids in the cafeteria discover that Nikki is able to draw tattoos, they quickly swarm the table. Chloe and Zoey take command of the situation by arranging a schedule and a charitable book donation payment system. All three girls instantly become popular. Yet this sudden swell of popularity will go to their heads, and it undermines their friendship in the coming chapters.

In the meantime, the three friends are thrilled that they have any kind of popular standing at all. Adding to this is the fact that three of the most attractive, popular guys in school seek them out for tattoos – which continues to increase their excitement and their confidence. For Nikki, however, the number of attractive boys that are now paying attention to her don't matter so much as Brandon's compliments, and Brandon's paying attention to her.

Interestingly enough – but not surprisingly – MacKenzie doesn't want anything to do with Nikki's tattoos. MacKenzie herself ends up being a bully not only to the kids at school, but to her own family as well. When Brianna and Nikki enter MacKenzie's house to use the restroom, they are admitted by MacKenzie's mom – who is very sweet and very kind to them. She is the polar opposite of MacKenzie. MacKenzie herself shouts and yells at her mother, and shouts and yells about her younger sister. It is clear that MacKenzie's bullying is of her own making, and not due to family or any other situations.

The reader should also note that Nikki's decision to enter the art competition will have important consequences by the end of the novel. She decides to enter a beautiful watercolor painting she gave to her parents for their anniversary – and that her mom tells her to take good care of it serves as an ill-omen for coming events. These coming events will also serve in part as a catalyst for the climax of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey suddenly become so popular in this section of the novel? How do the girls use this to their advantage in terms of their LSA project?

## Discussion Question 2

Despite Brianna being an annoying little sister, she gives Nikki a good idea at breakfast. What is this good idea? How does it ultimately come to help Nikki?



## Discussion Question 3

How does MacKenzie react to the sudden surge of popularity that Nikki experiences? Why? How does Nikki in turn react to this? Why?

## Vocabulary

staggering, mysterious, aptly, murky, transmitting, garnish, sentimental, heirloom, fluttered, procurement, appalled, embellishment, incessant, ponder

## Pages 229 - 282

### Summary

The tattoo craze begins at school, and Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey collect dozens of books. Chloe raises the cost of a tattoo to two books, which brings in even more books. Beyond the tattoos, Nikki begins making more friends as a result. Chloe later begins charging three books for emergency tattoo appointments. Nikki's schedule fills up quickly. 149 kids await tattoos. This annoys Nikki, because she was not consulted as to her own school schedule. The waiting list number grows to 216.

This causes an argument between the girls. Nikki has a difficult time trying to design and keep up with tattoos. When Chloe and Zoey are invited to MacKenzie's party, and Nikki is not, Nikki quits. She feels as if she has been used by Chloe and Zoey. She refuses the interview with Brandon.

On the phone with her grandma, her grandma reminds her to be brave – that it is up to Nikki to be a chicken or a champion. The following Monday, October 7, is the worst day of Nikki's life. She wakes up late for school, it is raining outside, and she must catch a ride with her dad to school in his exterminator van. At school, Nikki sets her painting down against the van, thrilled to have just made it on time, and thrilled no one has seen her getting out of the van – except MacKenzie. She cruelly makes fun of Nikki for the van. Nikki is then horrified as her dad accidentally runs over the painting. MacKenzie makes fun of Nikki for this, too.

Nikki sits on the curb and cries. She then notices Brandon standing above her with an umbrella. He helps her up, and asks if she is okay. He still thinks Nikki's broken painting is better than MacKenzie's. She is amazed to realize how little he cares what other people think of him, and grateful for his kindness. He walks her to the office so she can call her dad for dry clothes. At her locker, she sees kids laughing at a drawing of a bug and the words "bug girl" scribbled on it. Brandon says that only a real loser would do something so mean and stupid, but Nikki runs ahead to call her parents, determined to leave school forever.

Nikki stays home the next day with a cold. She calls Zoey at the library to see how everything is, but Zoey says Brandon is with her and Chloe, that they are busy, and can't talk. Nikki's parents have decided to allow her to transfer to public school, and are not upset about what happened to the painting. The mood is lightened when Brianna reveals she has drawn a mural on the wall with permanent marker.

On Wednesday, Nikki and her parents head to Westchester Day School early to take care of paperwork for the transfer. Nikki swings by the art show to see who has won, and is stunned to see that she has won. There is a display of 16 black-and-white photos of her tattoos. It is the project that Zoey reported working on. Nikki is stunned. She decides not to transfer schools, and rushes back to the office to tell her parents so. The



secretary congratulates her on winning the art show. Nikki tells her parents she will explain it all later.

Nikki's locker has been cleaned, and she finds a note from Chloe and Zoey asking her to meet them in the janitor's closet. There, they apologize for taking advantage of Nikki. They explain they came together with Brandon to help Nikki by having photos taken of Nikki's tattoo work. They reveal that MacKenzie was enraged when she learned that Nikki had won. Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey laugh about it.

On Thursday, MacKenzie tells Nikki she didn't put the graffiti on her locker, but Nikki doesn't believe her. Nikki decides to ignore MacKenzie as much as she can, because in the grand scheme of things, MacKenzie doesn't matter to her. Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey reopen their tattoo program in a limited fashion, making sure Nikki has enough time for everything else in addition to drawing tattoos. She hopes to be selected for the LSA trip to New York, so she can meet authors, and sell autographed books on eBay to earn money for an iPhone.

Chloe and Zoey insist Nikki draw a tattoo for herself which says "Champion" on it. Nikki then thanks Brandon for everything. Brandon asks to be Nikki's lab partner. She happily agrees. She has come to realize she can only be herself – a good, happy dork.

## Analysis

It quickly becomes apparent that Chloe and Zoey see their popularity as contingent on Nikki's art skill. By promising so many tattoos, and piling up appointments, they ensure their continued popularity. Nikki, however, quickly becomes overwhelmed by the sheer amount of time needed to do so many tattoos. It becomes a strain on her, and strains her friendship with Chloe and Zoey, who become impatient with her lack of progress. Zoey ultimately quits. Her friendship with Chloe and Zoey appears damaged and beyond repair.

Only Brandon is there for Nikki when no one else is at school. Brandon risks a lot by sticking up for Nikki – including his reputation and popularity – but he doesn't care about this. He knows what is right and what is wrong, and this is how he bases his actions and words. By defending Nikki, he isn't trying to be cool or popular, but he is doing what he likes. It is also obvious that he likes her to some degree beyond friendship, but exactly to what extent this may be is left for future novels.

Friendship continues to remain a strong theme through the remainder of the novel. Chloe and Zoey quickly realize that MacKenzie has been attempting to ruin their friendship with Nikki. They also realize that they have taken Nikki's friendship, and her artistic talents, for granted. They rally together with Brandon to enter the art competition for Nikki on Nikki's behalf. The strength of their friendship ultimately endures. It is because of this that Nikki decides not to transfer schools at all.

Family also serves to be important in this section of the novel – as does courage. Nikki's parents know that Nikki has been struggling in her new school emotionally. However,





the events of the worst day ever convince them that Nikki should probably transfer schools. They know their daughter has courageously tried to stick it out, but has been unable to do so. As a result, they finally relent to letting Nikki switch schools.

However, Nikki also has a brief phone conversation with her grandmother. Seeking her grandmother's advice, her grandmother reminds her that she has the choice to be a chicken or a champion. It is simple advice – corny, even – but it is advice that Nikki ultimately takes to heart. Knowing that she has friends at Westchester Day in Chloe, Zoey, and Brandon, Nikki decides to tough it out in the end. She relies on great courage to do so.

Her decision to do so is also a matter of coming of age. She is far more courageous and far stronger than she ever thought that she was. Nikki also has a profound realization about Brandon by the end of the novel as well. The reason she likes him so much is that he doesn't care what other people think about him. He is confident in who he is, and what he is all about – and this ends up affecting Nikki in the same way. By the end of the novel she is more confident and more sure of herself. She calls herself a dork – and no longer has any problem with being one.

## Discussion Question 1

Despite what happened with the tattoo project, Nikki is very quick to forgive and befriend Chloe and Zoey once more. Why do you believe this is?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Nikki come to admire most about Brandon? Why? How does this come to help Nikki herself?

## Discussion Question 3

In the end, Nikki decides to stick things out at Westchester Day. Why does she decide to do this?

## Vocabulary

pestering, charity, constipated, mature, rational, juvenile, senile, aroma

# Characters

## Nikki

Nikki J. Maxwell is the main character and principal protagonist in the novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” by Rachel Renee Russell. Nikki is 14 years old, is sweet, kind, very artistic, not very good at math, and pretty. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell, has a grandmother, and is the older sister of Brianna. Nikki hopes that her new school, Westchester Day, will yield popularity, friends, and a fun time to her. Yet, she worries about starting school because she doesn’t know anyone, and because her family is not wealthy like the families of all the other students who attend.

From the start, Nikki feels as if she doesn’t fit in or belong. No one says hello to her, and she quickly becomes a target for bullying courtesy of MacKenzie, who seems to zero in on Nikki like no one else. However, Nikki’s desire to enter the art show, and her inadvertent signing up for the Library Shelving Assistant program leads her to become friends with Chloe and Zoey – who also hate MacKenzie. Nikki’s desire for popularity fades as she realizes she fits in and belongs with Chloe and Zoey, and as she develops a crush on Brandon.

When Chloe and Zoey decide to run away to New York for Library Week because their parents won’t let them get tattoos to distinguish their love of reading against the other Shelving Assistants, Nikki decides to draw them temporary tattoos. This makes them decide not to run away. They receive attention of their tattoos, which becomes a charitable book donation plan in exchange for tattoos drawn by Nikki. However, the popularity goes to the heads of Chloe and Zoey, and Nikki is overwhelmed by the sheer number of tattoos she must draw. Their friendship is strained, and Nikki quits.

When Nikki has her worst day ever – she is late for school, her art competition entry is destroyed, and MacKenzie mocks her for her father’s work – Nikki is able to convince her parents to let her change schools. But when Nikki learns that Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey have rallied to her defense, and entered photographs of her tattoo work into the art exhibition, she decides to stay in the school. She realizes she does indeed have friends. She also comes to realize that the most attractive thing about Brandon is his self-confidence. He doesn’t care what anyone else thinks about him, and it helps Nikki to begin to feel the same.

## MacKenzie

MacKenzie Hollister is the antagonist and primary bully in the novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” by Rachel Renee Russell. Incredibly wealthy, gorgeous, and cruel, MacKenzie is also a new girl at Westchester Day School. MacKenzie instantly gains a following of very popular and very mean girls. MacKenzie is



quick to ridicule, mock, and make fun of other kids, especially other girls, for their fashion sense and physical appearance. Nikki becomes MacKenzie's primary target, sparing no expense to harass Nikki.

MacKenzie is especially enraged by the fact that Nikki seems to get along so well with Brandon without even trying. MacKenzie later goes on to become especially vicious in her bullying of Nikki after Nikki's painting is destroyed, and after she finds out that Nikki's dad is an exterminator. She laces Nikki's locker with cruel graffiti, though she denies doing this. MacKenzie is ultimately livid that she does not come in first place in the art competition – and that Nikki does.

## **Chloe**

Chloe Garcia is student at Westchester Day School where she works as a Library Shelving Assistant. She is good friends with Zoey, and becomes good friends with Nikki. Chloe's family owns a software company, and is very wealthy. Chloe herself is very feminine and loves to read. She is sweet, kind, and desires to distinguish herself as a Shelving Assistant in order to attend Library Week in New York. She, Nikki, and Zoey begin the "Ink Trade" project, where charitable book donations earn a tattoo by Nikki. However, the popularity the project brings on goes to Chloe's head. She and Zoey begin to take advantage of Nikki's skill in lieu of the popularity it brings. However, she and Zoey quickly realize their mistake. After they learn about Nikki's worst day ever, they work together with Brandon to enter photos of Nikki's tattoos in the art exhibition, and make up with Nikki.

## **Zoey**

Zoeysha "Zoey" Ebony Franklin is student at Westchester Day School where she works as a Library Shelving Assistant. She is good friends with Chloe, and becomes good friends with Nikki. Zoey's mother is a lawyer while her dad owns a record company. They are very wealthy. Zoey is very feminine and loves to read. She is sweet, friendly, and desires to distinguish herself as a Shelving Assistant in order to attend Library Week in New York with Chloe. She, Nikki, and Chloe begin the "Ink Trade" project, where charitable book donations earn a tattoo by Nikki. However, popularity from the project goes to Zoey's head. She and Chloe begin to take advantage of Nikki's skill in lieu of the popularity it brings. However, she and Chloe quickly realize their mistake. After they learn about Nikki's worst day ever, they work together with Brandon to enter photos of Nikki's tattoos in the art exhibition, and make up with Nikki.

## **Brandon**

Brandon Roberts is a student at Westchester Day School where he works as a writer and photographer for the school newspaper. Described as a quiet rebel, Brandon is very popular without having to try. Nikki later comes to feel that the most attractive thing about Brandon is that he doesn't care what other people think of him. While much of his



background is unknown, it is clear that Brandon is a morally upright guy, who is always quick to defend Nikki. He appears as a bright spot in many moments of darkness for Nikki, such as when he covers her with an umbrella in the rain on Nikki's worst day ever. He teams up with Chloe and Zoey and to take photos of Nikki's tattoos to enter into the art competition on her behalf.

## **Jessica**

Jessica is a member of the elitist group of popular kids that hangs out with MacKenzie. Jessica is a cruel bully, who makes fun of Nikki for accidentally opening a party invitation meant for Jessica. Jessica later cruelly trips Nikki in the cafeteria, causing Nikki to be covered with food.

## **Mrs. Maxwell**

Mrs. Maxwell is the mother of Nikki and Brianna. Mrs. Maxwell is unfailingly kind, sweet, and gentle, and she is a devoted mother and wife. She and her husband worry deeply about how Nikki is adjusting at school, and encourage her to tough it out. However, when things get too difficult for Nikki, they consent to letting her transfer schools.

## **Mr. Maxwell**

Mr. Maxwell is the father of Nikki and Brianna. Mr. Maxwell is incredibly kind, loyal, and goofy. He is an exterminator by trade. His winning an extermination contract with Westchester Day School enables him to solicit a scholarship on Nikki's behalf so Nikki can attend the school. Mr. Maxwell and his wife worry deeply about how Nikki is adjusting at school, and encourage her to tough it out. However, when things get too difficult for Nikki, they consent to letting her transfer schools.

## **Brianna**

Brianna Maxwell is the younger sister of Nikki, and is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell. At six years old, she is a typical little sister, annoying Nikki on a daily basis. However, Brianna inadvertently helps Nikki during the novel. Brianna draws a face on her hand and uses it to speak to Nikki. This gives Nikki the idea of drawing temporary tattoos on Chloe and Zoey.

## **Grandma**

Grandma is the grandmother of Nikki and Brianna. Grandma is a very sweet but unusual woman with strange hobbies. For example, she is obsessed with the game show "The Price is Right" and is writing a guidebook for contestants. Nikki solicits

Grandma's advice about difficulties at school twice in the novel, during which time she tells Nikki that it is her choice to either be a chicken or a champion.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Diary

A diary is given by Mrs. Maxwell to Nikki as a gift. The diary's exterior is made of jean material, and includes a decorated back pocket on the front cover. The diary is given to Nikki instead of an iPhone. Nikki is incredibly annoyed with the diary, and considers it the worst gift ever. She vows never to write in the diary, but the diary soon proves to be her primary outlet when she deals with trying to fit in at her new school while contending with MacKenzie's bullying. Entries into the diary in the form of words and pictures ultimately make up the entire novel.

## iPhone

Nikki desperately wants an iPhone at the beginning of the novel. She believes that an iPhone will make her popular, and at the very least help her to fit in. Having spent all her money on art supplies, Nikki is unable to afford an iPhone on her own, so she appeals to her mother. Her mother buys her a diary instead.

## Stylish wardrobe

Apart from an iPhone, Nikki believes that a stylish wardrobe will make her popular and help her to fit in at school. Nikki is attending a school full of very wealthy students who all have designer wardrobes. Nikki sees having a stylish wardrobe as a way of blending in and belonging, but also as a way of making her stand out in popularity. Nikki never gets her wardrobe.

## Art supplies

Art supplies are purchased frequently throughout the summer by Nikki. An artist, Nikki is constantly drawing, painting, and creating. In order to do work as an artist, Nikki must buy art supplies. As a result, she is broke by the end of the summer, and cannot afford the iPhone she wants to buy.

## Tattoos

Tattoos promoting reading are seen by Chloe and Zoey as a way to distinguish themselves against the other Library Shelving Assistants to be selected for a trip to National Library Week in New York. When Chloe and Zoey's parents will not allow them to get real tattoos, Nikki steps in to draw fake tattoos for them. Other students see this, and the three girls become instantly popular. They begin accepting charitable book donations in exchange for tattoo work. However, this popularity goes to their heads.

Nikki is unable to keep up with the demand set by Chloe and Zoey, who schedule appointments. After Nikki quits, and later goes through her worst day ever, Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey put together an art exhibit for her which features photographs of Nikki's tattoo work. It earns her first place.

## **Camera**

A camera is constantly carried and used by Brandon throughout the novel. As a photojournalist for the school paper, he is constantly taking photos. However, Brandon chooses not to photograph negative or bad things at school. He sees himself as a reporter second, and a human being first. For example, he would rather help Nikki up in the cafeteria than to photograph her after she is tripped by Jessica.

## **Watercolor painting**

A watercolor painting is created by Nikki over two summers at camp. She spends more than 130 hours working on it, and gives it to her mother and father as an anniversary gift. They are so happy with it that they have it mounted in an antique frame. Nikki decides to enter the painting in the Avant Garde Art Competition at school, but the painting and frame are accidentally destroyed when her father unknowingly runs over the painting.

## **Nikki's locker**

On the worst day ever, Nikki's locker becomes paramount in her decision to call her parents to bring her home, and to want to transfer schools. Nikki's locker is located right next to MacKenzie's, and as a result, Nikki often either overhears, or is a victim of, MacKenzie's bullying. On the worst day ever, MacKenzie draws a giant bug and writes the words "Bug Girl" on Nikki's locker, making fun of both Nikki and her father's profession.

## **Student Body exhibit**

The Student Body exhibit wins first place at the Westchester Day School Avant Garde Art Competition. The exhibit comprises a series of black-and-white photographs of Nikki's tattoo work. The photographs are taken by Brandon, and the arrangement is put together by Chloe and Zoey. The exhibit convinces Nikki that she does indeed have friends, and convinces her not to transfer schools.

## **Exterminator van**

An exterminator van with a giant cockroach on top is driven by Nikki's father, Mr. Maxwell, to work. The van is a serious source of embarrassment to Nikki, who does her

best to stay out of sight when forced to ride in the van. The van is seen by MacKenzie when Mr. Maxwell shows up to get rid of an infestation at her house, and later when Nikki is dropped off at school on the worst day ever. MacKenzie ruthlessly makes fun of Nikki for her father's work van.



# Settings

## Westchester

Westchester is a city in upstate New York. Westchester is where Nikki and her family live and work, and where Nikki attends school at Westchester Day School. It is also home to a mall and Nikki's father's extermination business. Westchester has middle-class areas and wealthy areas, the latter of which is where MacKenzie and her family live. Westchester serves as the main setting for the novel, with much of the plot occurring at Westchester Day itself.

## Westchester Day

Westchester Day School is the middle school where Nikki, Brandon, MacKenzie, Chloe, and Zoey attend class. Westchester Day is a wealthy private school which allows Nikki to attend based on her father's handling the school's extermination contract, and a scholarship. Most of the kids at Westchester are snobby and unkind, none more so than MacKenzie. Westchester Day's library hosts a shelving assistant program, in which Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey participate. It also hosts a newspaper, which Brandon works for as a photojournalist. The school also hosts an Avant Garde Art Competition, which Nikki and MacKenzie enter, and which Nikki wins.

## New York

New York is the largest and most populated city in the State of New York. It is home to the New York Public Library. It also plays host to National Library Week. Chloe and Zoey desperately want to attend Library Week in New York, and plan to run away and live in New York until the event after their parents refuse to allow them to get pro-reading tattoos which will make them stand out against the other LSAs. This gives Nikki nightmares. As a result, she draws temporary tattoos on Chloe and Zoey.

## Janitor's closet

The janitor's closet is where Nikki runs and hides after Jessica trips her in the cafeteria. There, Chloe and Zoey arrive to comfort Nikki, giving her a sweater and new lip gloss. The janitor's closet becomes a meeting place for the three girls, especially in times of trouble. One such meeting occurs after Nikki's worst day ever, when Chloe and Zoey make up with Nikki following their falling out during the tattoo project.

## School library

The school library is located at Westchester Day School. It is where Nikki, Chloe, and Zoey work as Library Shelving Assistants with the librarian, Mrs. Peach. The girls spend much of their time in the library, even devoting part of their time to doing their tattoos-for-books project. Chloe and Zoey are especially thrilled to be working in the library because they love books so much.

# Themes and Motifs

## Coming of Age

Coming of age is an important theme in the novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” by Rachel Renee Russell. Coming of age involves the personal, spiritual, moral, or emotional growth and maturation of an individual often based on real world experiences. In the novel, it is Nikki who comes of age, enduring bullying, finding courage, and becoming a stronger, more mature person in the end.

When the novel begins, Nikki is hopeful but nervous about her new school. She wants to fit in, make friends, and be fashionable. However, this does not happen. No one says hello to her at all, and she already feels worthless because the school is full of rich kids. Nikki herself is only attending the school because her family has received a scholarship for her to do so. She also feels inferior to MacKenzie, a gorgeous new girl who wears expensive clothes and jewelry.

MacKenzie is a cruel girl, who together with a small clique of girls, makes fun of the outfits and fashion of other girls. It soon becomes apparent that MacKenzie is the most popular girl at school –who soon turns her sights on Nikki. She makes fun of Nikki for her clothing, for the fact that her father is an exterminator in a van with a giant cockroach on top, and spares no expense to bully Nikki –such as when Nikki’s painting is destroyed, or when she draws a bug and the words “Bug Girl” on Nikki’s locker.

Nikki is emotionally distraught, doing her best to handle MacKenzie’s meanness. Nikki befriends Chloe and Zoey through working at the school library, which gives her a level of acceptance and belonging. This helps to bolster her confidence, though MacKenzie’s cruelty is unabated. MacKenzie becomes even nastier with Nikki when Brandon appears to take an interest in Nikki. But too much is too much for Nikki, who ultimately convinces her parents to let her transfer schools.

However, after soliciting advice from her grandmother on being a champion rather than a chicken, and after Chloe, Zoey, and Brandon band together to help Nikki win the art show, Nikki decides she will remain at Westchester Day School. She also comes to have greater confidence in herself and her abilities. This arises because Nikki has come to realize three important things.

First, she is far stronger than she has given herself credit for. MacKenzie has not torn her down, but has helped to strengthen her character and resolve. Second, she realizes through Brandon that she shouldn’t care about what other people think about her. What truly matters is her opinion of herself. Third, she realizes that she cannot be fake: she can only be her true self, which has done well in earning the loyalty of Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey. She is not wealthy is a dork, and she is happy with it.



## Friendship

Friendship an important theme in the novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” by Rachel Renee Russell. Friendship is one of the things that Nikki seeks from the start in her new school, Westchester Day. She believes that popularity will help secure friends for her, and that friends will enable her to be popular. However, things do not work out as she originally plans.

When the novel begins, Nikki has absolutely no friends at Westchester. Indeed, she doesn’t even know anyone. She is saddened that no one even bothers to say hello to her on the first day of school. While she is sad about this, she is not totally let down. However, it is clear that Nikki is approaching friendship in the wrong way: she thinks popularity will amount to friends, and friends will amount to popularity when the true meaning of friendship – acceptance, support, belonging, loyalty, and companionship – is being missed.

Ironically, it is Nikki’s being bullied by MacKenzie that causes her to sign up to work in the library. There she quickly becomes friend with Chloe and Zoey, two incredibly kind girls who also work at the library. Interestingly, Nikki at first considers them to be beneath her because they are more concerned with reading than Hollywood – but this attitude quickly disappears.

Chloe and Zoey give Nikki someone to sit with at lunch, to make fun of MacKenzie with, and later, to talk about boys with. They give her a feeling of belonging, of acceptance, of loyalty, and of companionship. The three friends ultimately conspire to distinguish themselves so they can have a shot at attending National Library Week in New York. However, the tattoos-for-books program between the three girls wears heaviest on Nikki, and Chloe and Zoey become too focused on the short-term popularity it brings them. Nikki quits the project as a result.

However, when MacKenzie ratchets up her bullying after Nikki’s painting is destroyed before the art show, Chloe, Zoey, and Brandon team together to make things right for Nikki. Brandon photographs the tattoos that Nikki has made, and the photographs themselves become the art exhibit for Nikki. They do it without her knowledge, causing her to be surprised, grateful, and amazed when she finds out.

Chloe and Zoey apologize for their behavior, and reconnect with Nikki. They explain that the popularity went to their head, and they took advantage of Nikki’s friendship and her art skills. Nikki readily forgives them, grateful not for popularity – but for friendship. The entire incident brings her and Brandon closer together as well. This is good for Nikki, because she has a crush on Brandon. The potential for their friendship to grow into something else is very real by the end of the novel.

## Courage

Courage an important theme in the novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” by Rachel Renee Russell. Courage – the act of being brave, or doing brave things even when they are unpopular or there is great adversity or fear – is essential to Nikki over the course of the novel. Courage also greatly influences the actions of other characters, including Chloe, Zoey, and Brandon.

Though she is nervous about attending a new school, Nikki carries on with it courageously, anyways. Not only is Nikki attending a new school where she knows no one, but the school is composed of wealthy students with wealthy families. These students have the best of everything – from clothes to technology – and Nikki does not. Nikki is determined to make the best of things, however.

Yet, even when she is confronted with MacKenzie’s cruelty and bullying, Nikki does not sink down to her level. She does her best to hold her head up and to persevere in the face of such unkindness. Two other girls who have courageously dealt with MacKenzie’s meanness are Chloe and Zoey – and the two girls become fast friends with Nikki. The three girls take courage in one another’s loyalty, support, and company against MacKenzie’s cruelty.

It is easier to go along with the crowd than to stand up to them, as Nikki soon learns. MacKenzie is able to turn Chloe and Zoey against Nikki with birthday party invitations on the heels of increased popularity for the girls following their tattoo project. The only friend of Nikki’s who courageously stands up to the crowd is Brandon. He does not go along with popular opinion or popularity, and would rather be friends with Nikki than to make fun of her.

Nikki comes to realize that Brandon’s courage comes not from being popular, wealthy, or cool, but because he is comfortable with who he is and not what anyone else thinks of him, and because he is genuinely a good person. This courage is catching, as Nikki herself comes to understand that who she is is what matters, not what other people think of her. This allows her courage to increase, and to more capably handle MacKenzie in the future.

## Bullying

Bullying an important theme in the novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” by Rachel Renee Russell. Bullying is the cruel treatment, by word and deed, of one person by another. Bullying occurs throughout the novel, almost always emanating from MacKenzie herself, and almost always directed toward Nikki.

From the very beginning of the novel, Nikki understands that MacKenzie is much more than just mean, but vicious. She listens to how horribly MacKenzie speaks of other girls, their outfits, their sense of style, and how attractive they are. MacKenzie quickly turns

her sights on Nikki when Nikki asks to be able to access her locker when MacKenzie and her friends stand in the way.

MacKenzie spares no expense to harass and bully Nikki. MacKenzie glares at her, makes crude comments about Nikki's clothes and sense of style, refuses to invite Nikki to her birthday party, allows MacKenzie to think that she is invited for a minute, and later mocks and derides Nikki when Nikki's painting is destroyed. She goes even further, mocking Nikki for the work Nikki's father does as an exterminator, and drawing a bug and writing the words "Bug Girl" on Nikki's locker.

Others act as bullies in the novel as well. These include MacKenzie's personal clique, including Jessica. Jessica cruelly mocks Nikki for opening her birthday invitation, and later trips Nikki in the cafeteria. This causes Nikki to get food all over her, and causes nearly the entire student body cafeteria to laugh at her.

However, the bullying backfires – especially for MacKenzie. Rather than causing Chloe and Zoey to permanently break away from Nikki, they realize their mistake and instead double-down in Nikki's defense. Rather than winning Brandon's attention or pulling him away from Nikki, Brandon also doubles down in the defense of Nikki. Because of MacKenzie's bullying, Brandon and Nikki are closer than ever, and Nikki is stronger than ever.

## Family

Family an important theme in the novel "Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life" by Rachel Renee Russell. Family, thematically, involves love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of others who may or may not be blood-related, but who still function and behave in the way of the traditional family unit. Nikki's family, although sometimes unusual and annoying to Nikki, end up being the best thing she has through the course of the novel.

Nikki's family is an average American middle-class family. There is her father, Mr. Maxwell, a pest exterminator; her mother, Mrs. Maxwell; her grandmother; and there is her 6-year-old sister, Brianna. Like many dads, Mr. Maxwell is a dedicated provider, a loving husband and father, and very goofy. Mrs. Maxwell is very kind, always optimistic, and is a dedicated wife and mother. Brianna is like any annoying younger sister. She has high levels of energy, tremendous spirit, and is very loud. Nikki's grandmother is a very unusual woman who has strange habits and hobbies, such as wanting to write a guidebook for the game show "The Price is Right".

Despite their annoying tendencies, Nikki's family is always there for her. When Nikki has a horrible first few weeks at school, Nikki's parents post positive affirmations on sticky notes around the house. They are a silly but touching thing. After Nikki's painting is ruined, and after MacKenzie writes "Bug Girl" on Nikki's locker, Nikki's parents consent to letting her transfer to a public school. They know that Nikki has been having a difficult time, and has tried to tough it out – but also know that her well-being is at stake. Like

any loving parents, they seek to make sure her daughter has a good experience in school.

Nikki's other family members inadvertently also help contribute to Nikki's life. When times get very tough for Nikki at school, she speaks with her grandmother on the phone about transferring schools. Nikki's grandmother contends that Nikki can either be a chicken or a champion. Nikki ultimately decides to be a champion, and her friends encourage her to give herself a tattoo proclaiming that she is a champion.

Even Nikki's little sister manages to influence Nikki in a positive way. Brianna annoys Nikki at breakfast by drawing a face on her hand, and then having her hand speak to Nikki. Nikki is very aggravated by this, but it gives her a brilliant idea to draw fake tattoos on Chloe and Zoey. This convinces them not to run away from New York – and in the long run, influences the project where books are traded for a hand-drawn tattoo by Nikki. Ultimately, this forms the core of the art exhibit that Chloe, Zoey, and Brandon enter on Nikki's behalf in the art competition.

# Styles

## Point of View

Rachel Renee Russell tells her novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” in the first-person reflective narrative mode from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist Nikki Maxwell. This is done because the entire novel is told in written diary accounts, composed by Nikki herself. It is only natural that the narration should be in first-person as Nikki herself is doing the writing. The reflective aspect of the narration – recounting previous events and commenting on those – occurs because Nikki is writing after the events themselves take place. As a result, she is able to reflect on them, to give them consideration, when she is writing.

## Language and Meaning

Rachel Renee Russell tells her novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for two primary reasons. First, the novel is being told from the point of view of a 14-year-old girl, and so the language used will be typical of a girl of that age and with a middle school level of education. Second, the novel’s primary audience consists of young adults – middle and high school students – and so the language employed is reflective of their age and their level of education as well. The novel is also peppered with contemporary phrases, slang, and internet terms, such as “OMG”, “whatev”, “par-tay”, “fashionistas”, and the use of smiley faces and emoticons.

## Structure

Rachel Renee Russell structures her novel “Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life” in the form of a diary written from the point of view of Nikki. Each page in the novel is lined as though pages from a diary. The font used is very informal, resembling the handwriting of a teenage girl. The handwriting font itself is intended to be Nikki’s personal handwriting. The diary itself is composed of dated entries, drawings, comic strips, and doodles, all done by Nikki. This is all in keeping with the title of the novel, “Dork Diaries”.



## Quotes

How am I supposed to fit in at a snobby prep school like Westchester Country Days?! This place has a Starbucks in the cafeteria!

-- Nikki (Section 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Nikki begins a new year and a new career at a new school. She has no friends there, and doesn't even know anyone before beginning. But one of the things that seems to worry Nikki the most is that everyone at the school comes from a wealthy family, while her own family is middle-class. Nikki's clothes, sense of style, and possessions (or lack thereof in the case of her iPhone) make her stick out – and all she wants to do is to fit in.

To call MacKenzie a 'mean girl' would be an understatement. She's VICIOUS!

-- Nikki (Section 1 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Early on, both Nikki and the reader are introduced to MacKenzie. MacKenzie will come to serve as the novel's chief antagonist. She is gorgeous and heartless, and this is made clear in the way MacKenzie speaks about other girls in the school. MacKenzie's comments aren't merely just mean, but downright cruel.

It was THE most important thing I had EVER attempted in my entire fourteen years of life here on planet Earth.

-- Nikki (Section 2 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Nikki decides she is going to enter the Avant-Garde art competition at school. Given that she is a new student in a new school, and given that she is a passionate artist, Nikki knows this will be the biggest thing she has done to date in her life. As a result, the art competition itself becomes incredibly important to the plot of the novel – especially later on.

I was just sitting there, eating my Cinnamon Life, reading the back of the cereal box, and trying to figure out what I was going to do about the Chloe and Zoey situation.

-- Nikki (Section 3 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Nikki's only two female friends at school want to run away to New York to wait out the National Library Week events because their parents will not let them get tattoos to distinguish themselves against the other LSAs. Nikki worries that they may actually follow through with this plan. When Brianna draws a face on her hand, Nikki is inspired with an idea for temporary tattoos. Giving temporary tattoos to Chloe and Zoey convinces them not to try their plan to go to New York.

I'm starting to get really excited because the avant-garde competition is only eight days away! I decided to enter my watercolor painting that took me two whole summers at art camp to complete. I spent more than 130 hours on it.

-- Nikki (Section 4 paragraph 1)



**Importance:** As the art competition nears, Nikki finally chooses what to enter. She decides she will enter a beautiful watercolor painting that became an anniversary gift for her parents, who in turn displayed it in a classic antique frame. The decision to enter this painting becomes part of Nikki's darkest hour, as the painting is later accidentally destroyed.

Practically everyone in the cafeteria was staring at us, but I ignored them and kept right on working. Zoey's tattoo turned out really cool, and she loved it.

-- Nikki (Section 4 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** In the cafeteria, Nikki begins working on tattoos for Chloe and Zoey. It begins to attract the attention of everyone else in the cafeteria, except for MacKenzie and her group. It makes Nikki and her friends happy because it gives them a popularity boost – but they mistake popularity for genuine friendship, and are quickly let down by their swift rise when Nikki gets overwhelmed and no longer wishes to create tattoos.

SO I did the most mature and rational thing possible under the circumstances... I QUIT  
□ ! If I have to draw one more tattoo, I'm going to VOMIT! I thought Chloe and Zoey were my real friends.

-- Nikki (Section 5 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Nikki, overwhelmed with the demand to create tattoos for the project she, Chloe, and Zoey have committed to, decides to quit. This also comes in conjunction with Chloe and Zoey refusing to take Nikki's feelings and schedule into consideration when making appointments. The problem is only compounded when Chloe and Zoey are invited to MacKenzie's birthday party, and Nikki is not. Nikki decides enough is enough, and quits, believing that Chloe and Zoey care more for popularity than friendship.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE make all of this NOT really be happening to me. Today has been the WORST day of my ENTIRE life!!

-- Nikki (Section 5 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Nikki's worst day so far in the year occurs on Monday, October 7. Everything that can possibly go wrong for Nikki, goes wrong. She oversleeps, has to ride to school with her dad in his exterminator van, watches as her art entry is accidentally destroyed, and is made fun of by MacKenzie for both the destruction of her art entry and her father's profession. Except for Brandon, no one comes to her defense. Nikki is so distraught, however, that she cannot even take comfort in Brandon's kindness. Nikki rushes to the school office to call her parents, and stays home the next day with a cold.

Unlike me, he didn't obsess about what other people thought about him. I think THAT was probably the coolest thing about him.

-- Nikki (Section 5 paragraph 4)



**Importance:** The thing that Nikki comes to admire most about Brandon is what she herself has been lacking most: self-confidence. Nikki has come to realize through the novel that popularity is not all it is cracked up to be, and that the only person whose opinion truly matters to her is that of herself. Brandon here becomes not merely a good friend (and potentially something more), but a good role-model as well. It also demonstrates that Nikki's reasons for liking Brandon have nothing to do with superficiality, but with his genuineness as a human being.

Maybe WCD was not such a horrible place after all. I actually had real friends here.  
-- Nikki (Section 5 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** In the end, Nikki decides not to transfer schools. This is largely due to the friendship and loyalty of Brandon, Chloe, and Zoey. They rally together not only to defend Nikki after her worst day ever, but to enter the art competition on her behalf. Their kindness and quick action lead to Nikki winning the art show – and enraging MacKenzie.

In spite of the fact that we had agreed not to do any tattoos until next month, Chloe and Zoey insisted that I do just ONE more... FOR MYSELF. My tattoo totally ROCKED!  
-- Nikki (Section 5 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** At the very end of the novel, Nikki draws one final tattoo. It draws on her courage and her grandmother's advice to not be a chicken. The tattoo Nikki designs for herself is one that says "Champion" on it.

I can only be myself, right? I'M SUCH A DORK! :) !!!  
-- Nikki (Section 5 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Here, Nikki follows up her admiration of Brandon for being true to himself, and for never pretending to be something he is not. Here, Nikki has achieved a considerable level of courage and comfort in herself and in who she is. She is a dork, but she is happy with it. She has changed since the beginning of the novel, when she wanted to do whatever she could to fit in.