

El Deafo Study Guide

El Deafo by Cece Bell

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



Contents

El Deafo Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-4.....	5
Chapters 5-9.....	9
Chapters 10-14.....	13
Chapters 15-18.....	16
Chapters 19-21.....	19
Characters.....	22
Symbols and Symbolism.....	26
Settings.....	29
Themes and Motifs.....	31
Styles.....	37
Quotes.....	38



Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, quote paragraph numbers actually refer to panel illustration numbers.

“El Deafo” is a semi-autobiographical young adult graphic novel by Cece Bell. In the novel, an anthropomorphized rabbit version of Cece Bell, known as Cece, struggles to balance her childhood with her deafness. The story begins when Cece is a four year-old rabbit who is living a normal, happy life. She has a loving family, a best friend named Emma, enjoys bike rides with her dad, putting on her mom’s makeup, and watching TV with her older brother and sister, Ashley and Sarah.

When Cece contracts meningitis, she must recover in the hospital. Her illness leads to deafness. Cece is not thrilled when she is fitted with a hearing device because it makes her look markedly different from everyone else. Also, Cece is required to attend special education kindergarten class, where she is placed with other hearing loss kids. While there, Cece learns how to both hear and understand what is being said. For example, the words “bear” and “pear” sound similar, but visual and contextual clues, along with lip-reading, can help Cece distinguish what is being said. For example, a conversation in the woods means the speaker is probably talking about a bear, whereas the speaker rubbing his or her stomach probably means the speaker is talking about a pear. After kindergarten, Cece and her family move to Roanoke, Virginia.

In Roanoke, Cece longs for a new start. She wants to fit in with the other kids in the neighborhood and at school. Although most of them are friendly, Cece’s attempts to make friends are often difficult at best. When she becomes friends with Laura, she discovers just how controlling and mean Laura can be when Laura refuses to let Cece hang out with anyone else. Laura also sics her dog on Cece. She allows the dog to bite Cece. Then, Laura laughs at her. Cece’s next friend, Ginny, is kind enough, but she is overly sensitive to Cece’s deafness. She speaks loudly and slowly. She also introduces Cece to everyone as her “deaf friend,” which ultimately wears thin on Cece. During this time, Cece does her best to be accepted by other kids, to find true friendship, and to deal with her hearing loss. At school, she must wear an even larger, specialized hearing device called the Phonic Ear, which makes Cece feel as if she stands out even more, when all she wants is to fit in. As a result, she invents the superhero alter ego of “El Deafo.” El Deafo possesses superpowers of super hearing. El Deafo becomes an escape from reality for Cece and a role model for real life. For example, El Deafo has no problem standing up to Laura in Cece’s mind. However, in real life, Cece cannot summon the same kind of courage.

Eventually, Cece finds a true friend in Martha, who neither cares about Cece’s hearing loss, nor treats Cece any differently than anyone else. Cece is thrilled, and the girls get along wonderfully –from making dirt soup together to talking about shows they like, to having slumber parties and jumping on Mike’s trampoline. One day, while playing tag with Martha, Cece temporarily injures her eye when she runs into a tree branch. This causes Martha to feel sad and guilty. She blames herself for Cece’s injury. As a result,



she begins avoiding Cece because she does not want to accidentally hurt Cece again, even though Cece tells Martha it was an accident that had nothing to do with her.

At the same time, Cece works up the courage to have a real conversation with Mike, her crush. She tells him about the amazing range the microphone of her Phonic Ear has and how it allows her to hear things, such as teachers going to the bathroom, and talking. She can hear them talking to other teachers about problematic students, too. Mike finds this amazing. He conducts an experiment with Cece to find out the distance that the Phonic Ear can transmit. The experiment gets the attention of all the kids in the neighborhood. They come to see Cece and her hearing device as cool. This makes Cece very happy. When she alerts her classmates the next day that their teacher is approaching the classroom, it allows the students goofing off to rush back to their seats. Mike calls Cece a hero. At long last, Cece not only feels accepted and liked, but she feels normal and super at the same time –a blending together of her fantasy of El Deafo and real life. At the end of the novel, Cece and Martha renew their friendship and become even stronger friends as a result. Cece goes on to tell Martha all about El Deafo and her true friend, Martha.



Chapters 1-4

Summary

Chapter 1 – Celia “Cece” Bell is an ordinary rabbit kid growing up in the 1970s, who has an older brother named Ashley and an older sister named Sarah. She goes for rides on the back of her father’s bike and plays with her mom’s makeup. She has a friend named Emma. Cece loves to sing. At the age of four, she contracts meningitis. The doctors and nurses do all sorts of tests on her as she recovers, and she is moved into another room at the hospital where she begins to realize things have suddenly changed for her. Hearing is difficult at best, and she struggles to learn to walk again. Back at home, Cece’s brother and sister go to extra lengths to be nice to her, such as sitting with her until she falls asleep, or making paper boats filled with candy for her. As time passes, both Cece and her mom realize that Cece cannot hear at all.

Chapter 2 – Cece wears her bathing suit every day. One day, her parents make her put on real clothes. They take her to an audiologist. The audiologist runs a series of tests on Cece. In a sound booth with headphones on, Cece hears beeps for the test –the first sounds she has heard in two weeks. The audiologist shows Cece’s parents a chart with her results, after which her parents do not seem too happy to Cece. The man squirts some kind of goop into Cece’s ears. After it hardens, it is removed.

A week later, Cece’s parents take her back to the audiologist, where a hearing device has been prepared for her. It consists of two earbuds that were made from the goop. The device has wires that connect to a little pouch that hangs around her neck. Cece is thrilled that she can hear again, but she is not thrilled about how she looks with the box around her neck. The audiologist gives her a beautiful pouch for the hearing box and a lollipop. When Cece gets home, she puts her bathing suit back on and looks at herself in the mirror. She doesn’t look bad with the box, she thinks, but she doesn’t look good either –because of the cords to the ear pieces.

Chapter 3 – Cece learns the box is called a “hearing aid.” She wears clothing over the hearing aid so it cannot be seen when she goes to visit her friend, Emma. She and Emma have always looked different, but it has never mattered to them. For example, Emma is taller. However, Cece worries about her hearing aid and cords. Emma tells Cece she looks fine, though she sounds a little different now. Cece has a hard time understanding Emma, but she manages to get by.

At the end of the summer, Cece begins kindergarten. But, she will no longer be going to the same school as Emma. As Cece rides the bus to her new school, J.B. Fisher Model School, she is accompanied by a woman. After arriving at the school, Cece meets a girl named Wendy, who also wears a hearing aid. All the kids in class wear them. Their teacher is a beautiful young woman named Dorn, whom they are allowed to call by her first name. Dorn teaches all the normal subjects, from math to reading. She also teaches the kids how to lip-read. This involves using not only hearing, but visual clues



from lips, contextual clues, and gestural clues. For example, while being in the woods, a person is probably talking about “bears” rather than “pears.” However, if a person is rubbing his or her stomach, she is probably saying “pears” instead of “bears”. Dorn encourages all of her students to practice at home. Many things confuse Cece along the way, though, such as group discussions where everyone is talking at once, or when someone talks to Cece without facing her. But at school, everyone understands Cece’s frustrations –George, Sabrina, Terry, Wendy, Fred, and Jamie, are all just like Cece. Sadly, she must say good bye to them for the year as summer vacation begins.

Chapter 4 – As the summer gets underway, Cece's family moves from the city to Roanoke, a small town in Virginia. So, she must say goodbye to Emma. The new neighborhood kids are happy to meet Cece and her siblings. They are crazy about the radio. They always turn up the volume for Cece, but the trouble is that Cece can hear things fine. She just can't understand them without seeing the faces of people. Cece feels very lonely because she can't understand the radio. She reads Batman comics all summer. When first grade begins, Cece wears a just-for-school hearing aid called the “Phonic Ear.” It is bigger than the regular one, and Cece still wears it under her clothing. Her teacher, Mrs. Lufton, wears a microphone that transmits directly to the Phonic Ear. Cece soon discovers she can hear Mrs. Lufton loud and clear no matter where the teacher is in the school. For example, she can hear Mrs. Lofton when she's in the back of the classroom, or in the principal's office. Cece can even hear her when she is in the teachers' lounge where the teachers complain about bad kids. Those conversations make Cece laugh. She can even hear Mrs. Lufton use the bathroom. Cece realizes she has a special ability with the hearing aid, just like Batman with all of his devices.

Cece realizes she can become a superhero, with the super power of super-hearing. But she also realizes that, like superheroes, she is different. Being different sometimes means feeling alone. A kid asks Cece if she is deaf, and Cece wonders if she can hear at all without her hearing aid. She feels like she exists inside a bubble, apart from everyone else.

Analysis

“El Deafo” is a young adult semi-autobiographical graphic novel about writer and illustrator Cece Bell’s childhood struggles with hearing loss. The characters in the novel are rabbits. They become anthropomorphized, semifictional representations of their real-life counterparts. Cece Bell represents herself through the character of Cece, whose life, from the age of four through fifth grade, is examined in the novel. When the novel begins, Cece is an ordinary kid, who has a loving family. The theme of family can be seen immediately in the novel, as the author takes great care to explain how close Cece is with her family –from going on bike rides with her father to trying on her mother’s makeup and watching television with her siblings. Even when Cece has her bout with meningitis, her family is still there for her. Her mother remains close by, while her brother makes hundreds of little paper boats with candy in them for Cece to find around the house.



When Cece discovers that her hearing loss will require her to wear a hearing device, she immediately feels different. She longs for acceptances, which will become a major theme in the novel. The hearing device is a necessity for Cece, something that she now feels sets her apart from all the other kids around her. When she attends a special education kindergarten class, rather than the regular public school with her friend Emma, Cece feels very different. However, in kindergarten, Cece discovers she is with a bunch of similar kids, all with hearing issues. That makes her feel at home and welcome. The desire to be normal and to be accepted will soon appear again as Cece and her family pack up and move to Roanoke, Virginia, in the summer following kindergarten.

In the new town, Cece is faced with finding a new friend and dealing with a hearing disability. As a result, both friendship and struggle become important themes in the novel. The Phonic Ear, a school-only hearing device that is far larger and more obvious than her home-model hearing aid, compounds Cece's problems because she thinks that it really sets her apart. However, she's delighted when she discovers that the Phonic Ear allows her to have a superpower-like ability to hear things all over school, including things she is not supposed to hear. Thus, Cece's imagining of an alter ego superhero is born. This paves the way for a fifth theme in the novel. The superhero that Cece envisions has not yet been named El Deafo at this point in the story, it later becomes central to the title of the novel.

In spite of the super hero power of super hearing the Phonic Ear has given Cece, she is still set apart from the rest of society. Most importantly, she's different from the kids at school. Her desire to simply blend in and be accepted as a part of the greater whole reinforces her belief that her hearing aid and her hearing loss distinguish her from the masses in a very bad way.

Discussion Question 1

What causes Cece to become hearing impaired? Is she actually deaf, or is she merely hard of hearing? Explain.

Discussion Question 2

How does Dorn attempt to help her students with lip-reading? What does she suggest that will help with the lip-reading method?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Cece compare herself to a superhero? What are the ups and downs of being compared to a superhero?

Vocabulary

Audiology, goop, adjusts, hearing aid, definite, deaf.



Chapters 5-9

Summary

Chapter 5 – Cece worries that everyone is always staring at her because of her hearing aid. She feels trapped inside her bubble. The bubble pops when a girl named Laura befriends Cece. Cece likes the fact that Laura does not seem to care about her hearing aid. However, Laura is pushy and not always very kind. For example, Laura says her name is prettier than Cece’s name, and she is very possessive. She doesn’t want Cece to be friends with anyone else, even in Girl Scouts. Laura insists on Cece dressing just like she dresses. Even worse, Laura thinks it’s funny when she lets her dog bite Cece when Cece spends the night at her house. Eventually, Cece gets tired of Laura being pushy. She decides to push back like Batman – but, it never happens.

Chapter 6 – In the summer, Cece gets new behind-the-ear hearing aids for use at home. She wishes the Phonic Ear had the same kind of earbuds. All summer long, Cece hangs out with Laura because she doesn’t have any other friends. Just before third grade starts, Cece prays to God that He’ll put Laura in a different class, and Cece is thrilled that her prayers are answered. However, she doesn’t know anyone else in her new class, and everyone stares at her hearing aid cords. A new girl from Georgia, Ginny Wakeley, joins the class. She always seems to be looking at Cece’s hearing aid, too.

One day after school, Cece and Laura discover Cece’s mom talking to Mrs. Wakeley. Ginny is with them. Cece’s mom tells Cece and Laura to play with Ginny. Ginny speaks loudly because she worries Cece may not hear her. When Laura makes fun of Cece and Ginny for talking about how much they both like Richard Scarry books, Ginny tells Laura she wasn’t talking to her, but to Cece. Cece is amazed at Ginny for standing up to Laura. When Laura leaves, Ginny talks about how bossy and mean Laura is to others.

Ginny is very sweet and very friendly, but very loud. As she and Cece begin spending more and more time together as their mothers become best friends, Laura is edged out of the picture. Ginny also begins to introduce Cece to new friends at school, like Kristen. Cece even joins the Girl Scouts. Cece doesn’t like how Ginny makes a huge deal out of her hearing, though. Cece finally snaps. She tells Ginny she doesn’t have to talk so loud. She even goes so far as to say she can’t stand it. Ginny is hurt deeply, having just wanted to help Cece.

Chapter 7 – Cece feels pathetic, now having no friends or anything to do. She spends most of her time watching TV, but she finds it difficult to understand. She enjoys seeing foreign films with her father because she can read the English subtitles. TV doesn’t have subtitles, but Cece does her best to watch everything from the Flintstones to the Waltons. Cece’s siblings don’t want to do things like play Old Maid. They want to do teenager things. Her sister Sarah smokes cigarettes. The only thing Cece’s brother and sister will do with her is watch TV. On an ABC after-school movie, Cece sees a character wearing a hearing aid, but she can’t understand what is being said. She asks



her siblings to help her with what the characters are saying. Cece finds out that one kid called the hearing aid kid “Deafo.” At first, Cece finds this mean; then, she thinks it’s funny. She begins calling herself “Deafo” for fun. Cece realizes her superhero name will be “El Deafo.”

Chapter 8 – Ginny and Cece make up a few weeks later, and Ginny invites Cece to her sleepover birthday party. Laura is not invited. She says that she has a new best friend named Beth. Anxious to go to the party, Cece cannot wait for the week to pass. Carrie, Ellie, and Missy, a very popular girl, all come as well. Ginny introduces Cece as her “deaf friend,” which annoys Cece a little. The sleepover is very fun, even though Missy is a little too friendly, overdoing it with Cece. When it comes time for makeovers, Cece gets out of it by insisting that she can’t wear makeup because she has a hearing aid. When all the girls get into their sleeping bags, they begin gossiping, which excites Cece. However, when the lights go out and they continue to talk and laugh, Cece can’t see their faces. She can’t tell what they’re laughing at, and she begins to feel self-conscious. Cece pretends that she feels bad and asks Mrs. Wakeley to call her mom. At home, Cece imagines El Deafo defeating the super villain girls in pajamas.

Chapter 9 – As fourth grade begins, Cece is excited for a new year. She doesn’t like having to wear the Phonic Ear again. She decides to sit with kids she doesn’t know, hoping to pass herself off as a hearing kid. Cece meets a girl named Bonnie who knows sign language. Cece is annoyed because Bonnie signs condescendingly to her, saying things like, “You are special.” It causes everyone else to watch, which embarrasses Cece. Cece’s mom thinks Cece should learn sign language herself, so she takes Cece to a church class on the subject. It is taught by Mrs. Blankenship, a very nice woman. During class, the hearing aid batteries run out. That event proves Cece’s mom’s point that learning sign language would be a beneficial thing. No matter how much Mrs. Blankenship, Cece’s mom, and the other attendees try to get Cece to participate, she simply doesn’t want to do so. Cece’s mom, however, is thrilled with it. Cece kicks her mom in the shin, which enrages her. Cece explains that she doesn’t want to learn sign language because she doesn’t want to be different from everyone else. She doesn’t want to be “special” because “special” is “different.” Cece’s mom says they don’t have to continue the class, but she warns Cece not to be so harsh to those who are only trying to help her. She might actually need their help one day. Cece and her mom stop for ice cream on the way home, where Cece notices a couple arguing in sign language. She realizes that she could understand what they were saying if she’d actually taken the class seriously. On second thought, she decides it would have done her no good. If she had learned to sign, everyone would be staring at her the way that she had stared at the couple.

Analysis

Cece continues to feel as if she is not accepted. She feels as if everyone is always staring at her because of her hearing device. The themes of acceptance and friendship are clear in this section of the novel, as Cece does her best not to stand out as being different. She does her best to be friend material by dealing with Laura’s meanness and



possessiveness. One of the reasons that Cece puts up with Laura for so long is that Laura does not make a big deal about Cece's hearing aid or hearing loss. In fact, she doesn't seem to bring them up at all. However, this acceptance means Cece must sacrifice genuine friendship by being friends with someone who finds it is funny when their dog bites her. Also, Laura will not allow Cece to hang out with others. Friendship under normal circumstances is not always easy. But, friendship is especially difficult for Cece.

At the same time that Cece's friendship with Laura begins to grate on her nerves to the point that it becomes problematic, Cece meets and befriends Ginny, who is sweet and kind. Eventually, Cece's friendship with Laura fades out in favor of friendship with Ginny. Laura had been unconcerned by Cece's deafness, but she was mean. Ginny is very compassionate, but overly sensitive about Cece's deafness. Ginny speaks very slowly in a loud voice when she introduces Cece as her "deaf friend." She does this quite often. It gets on Cece's nerves to the point that she eventually snaps at Ginny, causing a rupture in their friendship that is never fully repaired.

In the ninth chapter, the reader is given loud and clear insight into Cece's thoughts when it comes to her hearing impairment. Once again, this reinforces the theme of Cece's desire to fit in. Cece's mother brings her to a sign language class at the local church, but Cece refuses to learn sign language. She says that waving her hands around to speak will make her far more noticeable to people.

Cece is tired of being told that she is "special." To Cece, "special" is a synonym for "different." Her hearing loss causes people to over-empathize. While others think that the word "special" makes Cece feel better, it does not. It makes her feel abnormal. It depresses her. It forces her to stand out when all she really wants is to be treated the way people with no disabilities are treated.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Cece not get along so well with Ginny after a good beginning to their friendship? Do you think Cece's not getting along with Ginny is justified? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Cece refuse to be called "special" ? Why does she not want to learn sign language? How do you feel about Cece's reasoning?

Discussion Question 3

Why do so many people seem to go an extra mile for Cece, either to speak loudly to her, to sign to her, or to befriend her? How does Cece react to this? Why? Is she justified in reacting this way? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Pushy, obviously, exhausting, guarantee, miserable, vicious, enraged.



Chapters 10-14

Summary

Chapter 10 – The older kids on the school bus always invite Cece to hang out with them, but Cece thinks this is only because they have been told to be nice to the deaf kid. Cece's mother wonders why Ginny hasn't been around lately, but Cece doesn't want to talk about it. Cece then meets a third grader named Martha Claytor, and the two hit it off while making dirt soup together. They realize they watch the same shows. They have fun imagining what it would be like for characters in one show to end up in another show. Martha invites Cece to sleep over, and Cece is thrilled for two reasons. First, Martha is not in her grade, so she won't see the giant school-only hearing aid Cece wears. Second, Cece thinks Martha won't notice her behind-the-ears hearing aids. Martha's family gets Long John Silver's for dinner, and things go very well. It turns out that Martha knows all about Cece's hearing aids, and it doesn't bother her at all. Martha even hopes Cece will sleep over again. Cece realizes that El Deafo now has the best sidekick of all in Martha – a true friend.

Chapter 11 – The summer rolls around, and Cece and Martha do everything together. A new family moves in across the street. The parents and the kids are all incredibly good-looking. They are the Millers, and they have four children –Kathy, Steve, Caryn, and Mike. Cece immediately has a crush on Mike, and Martha finds this wonderful and hysterical. Cece swears Martha to secrecy, saying it is not true. Cece won't tell anyone she has a crush on Mike. She watches Mike from a distance, day after day. Martha talks to Mike and learns he has a trampoline in his backyard that Cece and Martha can use. He is very nice. Cece tells Martha once more that she does not have a crush on Mike. While Cece daydreams, she falls asleep on the trampoline. El Deafo is able to win Mike's heart easily in Cece's dream. Mike wakes Cece up to let her know that Martha has gone home. Cece is thrilled Mike has spoken so nicely to her.

Chapter 12 – Cece spends much of the summer on Mike's trampoline, sometimes with Martha, and sometimes alone. Martha thinks Cece should ask Mike to join them, but Cece is too shy. One afternoon, while playing tag, Cece runs into a tree branch and injures her eye. Cece must wear an eye patch while it heals. Martha is terribly upset, blaming herself for the injury. Even when Cece is better, Martha doesn't come around anymore. Cece wonders what she'll do without her best friend and sidekick.

Chapter 13 – As the summer winds down and fifth grade approaches, Ginny invites Cece to hang out. Cece's mom encourages Cece be friends with Ginny. Cece suggests jumping on Mike's trampoline. Ginny agrees, and Cece is amazed to see that Ginny has grown taller. She has grown boobs, too.

At the Millers' house, Mike tells Cece he'll be in Mrs. Sinklemann's class in the coming year. Cece excitedly responds that she will be in Sinklemann's class, too. Ginny is also going to be in Sinklemann's class. She is offended that Cece isn't as excited about that.



Cece realizes that Mike will see her with the Phonic Ear system. She worries about how he'll react. She gives Mrs. Sinklemann the microphone for the Phonic Ear, but Mike doesn't seem to mind at all.

Mrs. Sinklemann ends up being an amazing teacher. One day in class, Cece notices that things are a little out of focus. She wonders if her love for Mike is making her vision blurry. During a vocabulary test, Cece cannot see the words on the board, so she asks Ginny about them. Mrs. Sinklemann thinks Cece is cheating, and she gives her a zero. Cece ends up crying, wondering why Mrs. Sinklemann didn't give her a chance to explain. She later wonders what Mike will think of her for crying. At home, Cece's mother explains she ran into Mrs. Sinklemann at the grocery store, and Mrs. Sinklemann told her about what had happened in class. When Cece explains what really happened to cause Mrs. Sinklemann to think that she was cheating, her mom believes her. She thinks that Cece may simply need glasses. She gives Cece a Hostess Cherry Fruit Pie from the grocery store, which makes Cece feel better.

Chapter 14 – That Saturday, Cece gets glasses. Not only does everything become clearer, but she is able to lip-read much better. She hopes that her new glasses will impress Martha and encourage her to hang out again. When Cece sees Martha across the street, Martha runs away. At the bus stop, Cece shows Martha her new glasses, which causes Martha to throw up and run away. Mike tells Cece she looks like John Lennon with her glasses, and Martha is thrilled not only for the compliment, but she's learned that Mike knows about the Beatles.

Analysis

As the novel continues, many kids attempt to get Cece to hang out with them, or attempt to get to know Cece. She feels that this is because the kids have been told to be extra nice to her, or the kids are sympathetic to her hearing loss. Unintentionally, the amount of attention being lavished on Cece is making her feel isolated. Once again, she just wants to fit in and not stand out as being different. Cece catches what she thinks is a break when she meets and befriends Martha, believing that her behind-the-ears earpieces will be less noticeable to Martha. However, as it turns out, Martha wants to be friends with Cece because she simply wants to be friends with Cece. She doesn't care about Cece's hearing device, and she doesn't treat her any differently because of her deafness. Indeed, Martha treats Cece as if nothing is wrong with her at all. Cece is thrilled with this, and she and Martha become fast friends. The themes of friendship and acceptance are once again coming to the fore. Martha accepts Cece not because she has been told to or because Cece is deaf. She likes Cece for just being Cece, with or without a hearing aid.

The theme of family surfaces again in Mrs. Sinkelmann's class during the cheating accusation. Cece's mom not only trusts her daughter implicitly, but she knows who her daughter is and what her daughter is not (namely, a cheater). Rather than believe Mrs. Sinklemann's words that Cece was cheating, Cece's mom decides to go directly to Cece to see what Cece has to say. As Cece explains the situation, Cece's mom realizes



that she must need glasses. Interestingly enough, the glasses prove to be an important and ironic symbol at this point in the novel. Cece is not put off by needing glasses at all because she knows they will help her to do better in school. She will be able to see better. Although everyone does not usually wear glasses, Cece does not feel they set her apart at all. She can see the benefit of glasses –to see clearly. However, she does not equate glasses to her hearing aid, which allows her to hear clearly. Ironically, she cannot clearly see –or hear –the importance of her hearing aid.

Cece's encounters with Mike –the handsome new kid on the block –also give Cece reason to be courageous. Mike does not seem to care at all that Cece wears glasses and a hearing aid. He speaks to her and treats her like she is simply just another kid. Cece notices this, and it makes her developing crush on Mike develop all the more quickly. However, at the same time, Cece runs into a problem with Martha –by running into a tree branch. Martha feels terrible because she believes that she is the cause of Cece's injury. So, she avoids Cece, even though Cece tries to tell her that the eye injury incident was accidental. It had nothing at all to do with Martha. However, unlike Cece's past friendships with Ginny and Laura which end on bad notes, Cece's friendship with Martha merely appears stalled, out of genuine concern and care. This is something Cece has not encountered before in friendship.

Discussion Question 1

For what reasons does Cece decide to befriend Martha? What is the truth about Martha with respect to Cece's deafness?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe Cece's mom believed Cece, rather than Mrs. Sinklemann, about the incident in class?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Martha continues to avoid Cece? Why does Cece believe that Martha continues to avoid her?

Vocabulary

Rosette, guilt, rotting, disgusting, abolish, jubilation, spellbinding, hypnotic.



Chapters 15-18

Summary

Chapter 15 – Cece is amazed at how well she can see in class now. She doubles her efforts in academics. She gets straight As in all her classes, except for physical education –gym class. Mr. Potts, the gym teacher, puts all the athletic kids on one team and everyone else on the other whenever they play sports. Cece is not very athletic, but she does her best. During gym class one day, Mr. Potts accidentally drops Cece’s microphone, breaking it. Mrs. Sinklemann is sympathetic, telling Cece it will all be sorted out. The Phonic Ear must be sent to Silver Spring, Maryland to be repaired. It will take some four to six weeks. Cece is devastated. She will have to wear her at-home hearing aids for that time. She feels as if she is no longer the same El Deafo. She feels naked without the massive Phonic Ear. School becomes very difficult. However, in gym, Cece imagines herself to be El Deafo once more, with or without superpowers, and manages to set a record by doing a flexed-arm hang for sixty-four seconds.

Chapter 16 – Cece’s father has been away on a business trip. When he returns home, he brings Cece a curly pencil. Cece is thrilled with it. She shows all the kids at the bus stop the next morning, and they all think it is awesome –even Mike. But, Johnnie thinks it is stupid, and he breaks it. Cece begins crying and runs home, angry at herself for crying in fifth grade. She tells her mother what has happened. Ashley and Sarah drop Cece off at school on their way to high school. At school, Mike forces Johnnie to apologize. Mike then comforts Cece, but Cece doesn’t know how to respond because she wonders what Mike thinks of her for crying.

Chapter 17 – Cece is now bored at school without the Phonic Ear, and she is frustrated because she cannot hear much of anything. She pays attention to other kids sometimes and sees them goofing off. Among those kids one day is Mike, who gets caught. Cece feels very bad for Mike, who gets in trouble. She approaches him to tell him thanks for getting Johnnie to apologize. Instead, all she can manage is “uh” before everyone heads to lunch.

Chapter 18 – Four weeks and three days later, Cece’s microphone and hearing aid return. Cece is thrilled to be able to hear again. The sixth graders at school are putting on book presentations, and they need fifth graders to serve as bookends. Cece and Mike are selected as the first pair. They will need to wear matching pajamas. Mike is stunned and does not want to wear pajamas in front of the whole school. A few nights later, Cece and her mom go to the Miller’s house to see about pajamas. Mike is embarrassed again about the pajamas he will have to wear. Cece pretends to sympathize with him, but she secretly thinks he’ll look cute in pajamas. The day of the presentation arrives. During the presentation, Cece does her best not to laugh because Cece can hear Mrs. Sinkelmann use the bathroom. After the presentation, Cece gathers up enough courage to tell Mike about the hearing aid, and Mike thinks it is awesome. It’s



as though Cece has superpowers. Mike invites Cece over after school to try out an idea, and Cece is thrilled, thinking of it as her first date.

Analysis

Ironically, just as Cece's new glasses enable her to do better in school, her Phonic Ear must be sent in for repairs. Whereas she had previously been excited about her new glasses, but had been unable to see the benefit of the hearing aid device, she must now deal without it. She realizes just how much she has taken the Phonic Ear for granted. Not only does hearing become difficult for Cece on a day-to-day basis, but she feels as if her superpower of super hearing has been stripped away from her. She wonders how El Deafo can get along without super hearing. In another ironic twist, Cece's frustration comes to the fore. Turning her unhappiness into focusing on physical exertion, she sets a record for the flexed-arm hang.

The return of Cece's Phonic Ear not only restores Cece's super power hearing, but it also restores El Deafo to perfection. Interestingly enough, the theme of acceptance once more emerges as Cece's Phonic Ear is put back into action. She takes the tremendous step of telling Mike about her super hearing—a joining of El Deafo's courage to Cece's real life situations. Rather than being annoyed, dismissive, or freaked out, Mike is actually vastly intrigued by Cece's abilities. Indeed, he finds it to be really cool, which delights Cece. In the past, Cece has wanted to be accepted to the point that her hearing aid was indistinguishable—either in terms of people noticing, or being condescendingly oversensitive to her, thus making her stand out more. Mike's interest in Cece's hearing aid presents a rather new angle to things.

Additionally, Cece seeks to make things right with Martha, though neither friend has actually done anything wrong. Martha is merely overwhelmingly concerned with Cece. Cece struggles to remain friends with Martha—rather than put up with or get out of the relationship as she had done previously with Laura and Ginny. However, whenever Cece tries to seek Martha out to renew their friendship, Martha always runs away. Why she runs away will be made clear at the end of the novel. The themes of friendship and acceptance remain powerful throughout this stage of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What does Cece tell Mike that she has, as of yet, told no one else? Why does she tell him? How does Mike react?

Discussion Question 2

What is different about Martha's friendship with Cece? What does Cece think of her friendship with Martha?



Discussion Question 3

What does the loss of Cece's Phonic Ear make her realize? How does she come to view her hearing aid as a result? Why?

Vocabulary

Athletic, sympathetic, suspense, bawling, witnessed.



Chapters 19-21

Summary

Chapter 19 – As the school day wears on, Cece daydreams about how El Deafo would kiss Mike on her first date. When the day ends, Mike encourages Cece to bring her Phonic Ear along. Mike wants to test out the range of the microphone. So, he heads downtown while Cece remains at his house. All the neighborhood kids begin gathering around Cece. They are amazed at what she and Mike are doing. Cece is thrilled because everyone thinks she's cool. Even Martha swings by to see what is going on and then leaves. A short time later, the other kids leave, too. Cece then hears Martha talking to Mike. Martha explains that she has stayed away from Cece because she felt horribly about the eye incident and didn't want to hurt her again. She now worries Cece no longer likes her. When Mike and Martha appear down the street, Cece shouts that she still likes Martha. Martha, who has gone on an errand for her mother, departs quickly, telling Cece she is glad Cece is not mad at her. Mike, on the other hand, is impressed and amazed that Cece heard so much. He says he has another idea for school the next day. Meanwhile, Cece is very happy that things with Martha appear headed in the right direction and that all the kids in the neighborhood now think she is cool.

Chapter 20 – Cece saves a spot on the school bus for Martha the next morning, but Mike sits next to her instead. He encourages Cece to use her microphone to alert kids as to when Mrs. Sinklemann is approaching, so they can goof off when she is gone. He tells Cece that she will be a hero. Cece willingly agrees. However, at school she begins to reconsider what she has agreed to do, imagining she will get in trouble. When Mrs. Sinklemann leaves the room for twenty minutes, Mike explains to everyone in class what Cece can do with her hearing aid, and everyone is excited. They decide to party and check in every few minutes to learn what Mrs. Sinklemann is up to. Imagining herself to be El Deafo, Cece tells everyone to get back to their seats, just in time as Mrs. Sinklemann reappears in class. Ginny is even amazed at Cece and says that Mike told her to tell Cece that he was right about Cece being a hero. Cece knows she is a hero because she is El Deafo.

Chapter 21 – The next day, the kids decide to have a party with music, but Mrs. Sinklemann has Mrs. Catawba, the guidance counselor, read to the class as a part of the "Reading is Fun" campaign. She reads from the book "T.A. for Tots", which is about feelings. The students are then instructed to make warm fuzzies with bags to hold them. The class will exchange fuzzies with other classes. Cece draws her hearing aid on the front of her bag and a picture of El Deafo on the back. Mike shows Cece his bag, with the words "Worm Fuzzies" on the front of it and a logo for Van Halen on the back. Cece wonders how Mike could possibly like Van Halen. But, when it comes time to exchange Fuzzies, Cece is happy to give Mike a Fuzzy and thrilled to receive one from him. The activity makes Cece feel warm, fuzzy, and accepted. On the bus on the way home, Martha sits beside Cece, and Cece gives Martha a Fuzzy. Martha is delighted, and she



explains how worried she is about hurting Cece. Cece says she's tough and that they'll continue to be friends. Cece and Martha are both excited about their renewed friendship, which prompts Cece to tell Martha about El Deafo and her true friend.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, several important things happen. Cece renews her friendship with Martha, gets closer to Mike, and finally feels welcome and accepted among all of her friends. Interestingly enough, this occurs in large part due to Mike and Martha's encouragement and friendship. Also, Cece finally gains courage and happiness as a result of all the other kids thinking Cece's hearing disability is actually cool –along with Cece, herself. Indeed, Cece comes to realize that her friendship with Martha truly never had anything to do with her hearing loss, while her hearing loss serves as a key to more friendships and greater acceptance among all the other kids. By opening up to them, they are happy to open up to her, as well. In a blending together of Cece's alter ego and real life personality, Mike refers to Cece as a hero for alerting everyone to the approach of Mrs. Sinklemann.

The themes of friendship and acceptance do not, however, come to a close with Cece's part in listening out for Mrs. Sinklemann. In a demonstration that Cece herself, rather than her super hearing abilities matter most, all of the kids in her class end up giving Cece fuzzies during the book reading activity about emotions. This reveals that the other kids truly do like Cece for Cece and that the listening out incident was not merely an isolated or one-time occurrence. Indeed, Cece herself comes to view her hearing aid not as a hindrance or something that defines her or sets her apart in the end, but as merely a small part of her. This can be seen clearly in Cece's decision to illustrate her fuzzies bag with a picture of her hearing aid. It is now something she embraces, just as she embraces all of her new friends and her new outlook on life.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the other kids open up to Cece, and come to see her as cool? How does Cece know these kids truly think she is cool, rather than just what she can do with her Phonic Ear?

Discussion Question 2

Mike calls Cece a hero for being able to tell everyone when Mrs. Sinklemann is approaching, but Cece already knows she is a hero. Why? Do you believe Cece is correct? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

What is the truth behind Martha's avoidance of Cece? How does Cece react? How would you react to Martha if you were in Cece's position? Why?

Vocabulary

Experiment, convince, humiliated, hero, corny.



Characters

Cece

Cecilia “Cece” Bell is the main character and narrator of the novel “El Deafo” by Cece Bell. Cece is a semi-autobiographical characterization of the author. Cece is an anthropomorphized rabbit, light tan in color, and with a big pink nose and light brown hair on her head. Cece is four years old when the novel begins. She enjoys a relatively quiet life with her family. She loves to try on her mom’s makeup, go for bike rides with her dad, and watch television with her brother, Ashley, and her sister, Sarah. Cece contracts meningitis, however, which destroys her hearing and makes her deaf. As a result, Cece must wear a hearing aid, which she worries will make her stand out. Cece thus decides to hide the hearing aid under her clothing to make it less noticeable. When kindergarten begins, Cece goes to a special learning school, and takes a class with numerous other children who have hearing issues. In the class, Cece learns not only how to hear, but to understand as well. She learns to look for visual clues and context in conversation, and learns to lip-read. When kindergarten ends and the summer gets underway, Cece and her family move to Roanoke, Virginia, then a small town. Cece must leave all of her friends behind.

In Roanoke, in a new school and with new faces all around, Cece struggles to fit in and get by without calling attention to her hearing impairment. This is made more difficult by the Phonic Ear that Cece must wear at school. Though it is large and more noticeable, Cece is able to hear everything her teacher says with absolute clarity. She is also able to hear the teachers elsewhere when they are wearing the Phonic Ear’s microphone. For example, she can hear her teachers in the teacher’s lounge as they talk about bad kids. Cece comes to view this special ability to hear as a super power and uses it to create an imaginary alter ego for herself, the superhero “El Deafo”, who has the super power of super hearing. Cece uses El Deafo as a role model for how she wishes she could be –more courageous, more heroic, and more confident. For example, whereas Cece is unable to have a normal conversation with her crush, Mike, in real life, El Deafo is able to romance Mike off his feet.

Over the next few years, Cece goes through a number of friends. The friendships don’t work out for one reason or another. For example, while Laura doesn’t mind that Cece wears a hearing aid, Laura is mean and controlling and won’t let Cece have any other friends. Ginny, a sweet and kind girl, overdoes things by speaking too slowly and much too loudly when trying to communicate with Cece. The loud voice and references to Cece as “my deaf friend” are annoying.

Cece ultimately finds a true friend in Martha, a girl a year younger than she is, who doesn’t care in the least that Cece is deaf. Martha doesn’t treat her any differently than anyone else. Martha often teases Cece about her crush on Mike, and Cece swears Martha to secrecy. When Cece and Martha are playing tag one day, Cece injures her eye temporarily on a tree branch. Martha blames herself and shuts herself away for



much of the school year, worried she may hurt Cece again. By the end of the novel, Cece and Martha renew their friendship and become closer than ever. Additionally, the other kids in the neighborhood and school learn about what the Phonic Ear can do. They come to think of Cece and Cece's hearing aid as being cool. This thrills Cece, and she tells Martha about her superhero alter ego, El Deafo.

El Deafo

El Deafo is the superhero alter ego of Cece. El Deafo has the superpower of super hearing. The superhero is kind, courageous, loyal, and heroic. El Deafo wears a white undershirt, blue shorts, and a red cape, as well as the Phonic Ear. Cece takes El Deafo's name from an ABC TV movie she watches. The pejorative term "deafo," is what one of the movie's characters calls a hearing-impaired character. Cece makes the term her own and uses it in a very positive manner, naming her superhero alter ego "El Deafo." Cece looks to El Deafo as both an escape from real life and as a role model about how to behave in real life. For example, whereas Cece is afraid to talk to her crush, Mike, at first, El Deafo romances Mike off his feet. Also, Cece is afraid to stand up to Laura, but El Deafo has no problem in doing so. Over the course of the novel, Cece's courage grows and grows. Finally, she and El Deafo become one in the same when Mike calls Cece a hero for being able to tell all the kids in class when their teacher is coming to the classroom. She is able to have normal conversations with Mike, just like El Deafo.

Martha Claytor

Martha Claytor lives across the street from Cece. She is a year younger than Cece. Martha is very kind, sweet, and gentle. She invites Cece to make dirt soup with her one day, and the two girls realize they have much in common. As a result, they become fast friends. They do everything together from slumber parties to jumping on Mike's trampoline. Cece loves the fact that she can be herself around Martha. Martha does not care about Cece's hearing aid. She treats Martha like a normal kid.

While playing tag one day with Martha, Cece temporarily injures her eye on a tree branch. Martha blames herself for the accident. As a result, Martha avoids Cece for a long time, worried she'll hurt Cece again. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Martha and Cece renew their friendship, and it becomes stronger than ever. Martha becomes not only a true friend for Cece, but the best sidekick imaginable for El Deafo.

Mike Miller

Mike Miller is a handsome new kid in the neighborhood, having moved there with his parents and three siblings. Mike is athletic, likes the Beatles, and is very kind. Cece develops a crush on Mike immediately, but she is too shy to have an actual conversation with him. Instead of being put off by Cece's Phonic Ear, Mike is actually intrigued by it. He conducts a range experiment with Cece and the device. As a result,



all the other kids in the neighborhood and at school become vastly interested in Cece's device and in Cece as a person. Everyone thinks that she's cool. At school, Mike calls Cece a hero because of her ability to hear things so well. This thrills Cece.

Ginny Wakeley

Ginny Wakeley is one of Cece's friends in the novel. Ginny is originally from Georgia. She befriends Cece as Cece's friendship with Laura grows old and strained. While Ginny is sweet and well-intentioned, her treatment of Cece comes off as annoying. She speaks very loudly and very slowly, almost yelling in order to communicate with Cece. She also introduces Cece as her "deaf friend" to everyone else, which really starts to bother Cece. Eventually, Cece explodes at Ginny, telling her she can't stand the way Ginny speaks or deals with her. This leads to a rupture in their friendship that never fully heals.

Laura

Laura is Cece's first new real friend in Roanoke. While Laura does not care about Cece's hearing aid, which Cece loves, Laura is very controlling. Laura does not let Cece hang out with anyone else, and she always demands to have her way. Laura also does mean things, such as laughing when she tells her dog to bite Cece and it does. Cece tires of Laura's meanness. She starts to hang out with Ginny more and more. Eventually, Laura fades into the background because her friendship with Cece is gone.

Ashley

Ashley Bell is the older brother of Cece. He is a kind and caring brother who watches television with Cece on a regular basis. He also makes hundreds of small paper boats with pieces of candy inside them for Cece when she gets out of the hospital following her illness with meningitis.

Sarah

Sarah Bell is the older sister of Cece. She is a kind and compassionate sister who secretly smokes cigarettes and watches television with Cece. When Cece is released from the hospital following her bout with meningitis, Sarah stays up late with Cece until Cece falls asleep each night.

Cece's mom

Cece's mom is a wonderful, sweet, and compassionate woman. She and her husband have two other children, Ashley and Sara. Cece's mom is very close to her daughter as she helps her deal with the hearing impediment, the hearing aid, and the struggles with



friends. Cece's mom trusts Cece. She proves this by believing Cece over Cece's teacher after a cheating incident.

Cece's dad

Cece's Dad is a kind, strong, and gentle man who works hard and lovingly tends to his family. He often goes for bike rides with Cece. He also takes her to foreign language films so Cece can read the English subtitles and enjoy the movies.

Symbols and Symbolism

Hearing Aid

A hearing aid is fitted for Cece by the audiologist early in the novel following Cece's hearing loss after a bout of meningitis. This hearing aid consists of a central hearing device, worn about the neck, from which two cords run to connect two earpieces, worn by Cece in her ears. The hearing aid allows Cece to hear things again so that she can continue on in the hearing world. Cece is embarrassed about having to wear the device because it something unnatural to her body that sets her apart from all the other kids. As such, she always wears it underneath her clothing. This keeps her looking "normal."

Behind-the-ears Hearing Aid

A behind-the-ears hearing aid is developed and given to Cece after her original hearing aid. The earpieces are worn behind the ears, and are less noticeable than the previous hearing aid. The behind-the-ears hearing aid allows Cece to feel more normal and confident, especially at school. Like the previous hearing aid, Cece must rely on visual clues and context in order to fully understand the speaker, but the subtlety in appearance of the behind-the-ears hearing aid thrills Cece to no end.

Phonic Ear

A Phonic Ear is a hearing device which consists of a large receiving machine (worn about the neck) and two corded earpieces (worn in the ears) which connect to the machine. The machine receives signals transmitted by a microphone, which is worn about the speaker's neck. The Phonic Ear is larger and far more powerful than standard hearing aids. It is primarily used by Cece while in school. This allows her to hear things loud and clear. She doesn't need to rely on visual clues and context.

The Phonic Ear also gives Cece another hearing ability. If the teacher forgets to take the microphone off, Cece can hear what the teacher is doing and saying throughout the school, such as her teacher going to the bathroom or speaking about troublesome students. Cece equates this super hearing to a superpower. Super hearing becomes the trademark superpower of Cece's alter ego, El Deafo. Later in the novel, Mike Miller becomes fascinated by the Phonic Ear and conducts an experiment with Cece to see how far away she can hear the broadcasting microphone. The experiment earns the praise of the neighborhood kids, who all come to think Cece is cool. Cece later uses the Phonic Ear to alert her classmates as to when their teacher is coming. This makes the kids like Cece even more. It leads Mike to declare that Cece is a hero.



Glasses

Glasses are worn by Cece later in the novel when she begins having difficulty seeing things far away. Interestingly enough, having to get glasses doesn't bother Cece at all. Her acceptance of the glasses is a drastic change from how she hates wearing a hearing aid. Indeed, the glasses prove invaluable to Cece, who is now able to see things clearly. She is able to double her efforts in academics. Because of Cece's glasses, she is able to study and learn more easily. Her grades improve to the point of getting straight As in all her classes. Ironically, she sees the usefulness of her glasses, but she does not see or hear the usefulness of her hearing device. The glasses become symbolic of being able to see things in life more clearly as well. For example, she is able to be understanding of why Martha has been avoiding her, rather than becoming mad at Martha for avoiding her.

Microphone

A microphone is worn about the neck by teachers at school. The microphones transmit their voices directly to the Phonic Ear system worn by Cece. The microphone is invaluable to Cece. It not only allows her to hear in class, but it allows her to hear her teachers wherever they may be in school. She can hear them using the bathroom, and she can even hear them speaking to one another about troublesome students. When Mr. Potts accidentally drops the microphone, Cece must manage without it for more than four weeks, while it is being repaired in Silver Spring, Maryland. When the microphone comes back, Cece is elated that she can hear clearly again. When she reveals to Mike the extraordinary things she can hear because of the microphone, Mike conducts an experiment with Cece to determine the microphone's range. The experiment not only earns the admiration of the neighborhood kids, but it also makes them think that Cece herself is cool.

Curly Pencil

Cece's father brings Cece a curly pencil following his business trip. Cece is thrilled with the pencil. She shows it off to all the kids at the bus stop the next morning. However, Johnnie cruelly breaks the pencil. Cece ends up crying because the pencil was a gift from her father. Mike comes to Cece's aid, forcing Johnnie to apologize for having broken the pencil. It earns Mike tremendous respect in Cece's eyes.

Pajamas

Pajamas are worn by Cece and Mike while they are acting as bookends in the book pageant at school. Cece and Mike are both embarrassed to be seen in pajamas, but Cece thinks Mike looks very cute in his. After the performance, Cece reveals to Mike the power of her Phonic Ear, which impresses Mike beyond belief. He wants to try out the range experiment with Cece.



Fuzzies

Fuzzies are small, critter-like creations designed and made by the students in Cece's class as an activity after reading a book about feelings. The fuzzies are then distributed to each of the kids in class. Cece is thrilled to receive a fuzzie from Mike, and she is excited and nervous to give him one as well.

Fuzzies bag

A fuzzies bag is meant to hold the fuzzies that the students in Cece's class receive from one another. They are customized by the students to reflect who they are and their personal interests. Cece draws her hearing aid on one side of her bag and a picture of El Deafo on the back. Mike draws a Van Halen logo on one side of his bag and writes "Worm Fuzzies" on the other to make light fun of the activity. On the part of Cece, her openness about her Phonic Ear by drawing it on the bag shows that she has come to terms with needing a hearing aid, and it no longer seems to be something that sets her apart. It is simply a part of her.

Hostess Cherry Fruit Pie

A Hostess Cherry Fruit Pie is Cece's favorite kind of snack. Cece's mom buys a Hostess Cherry Fruit Pie for Cece when she is at the grocery store and learns of the cheating accusation from Mrs. Sinklemann. Cece tells her mother the truth at home. Her mother gives Cece the Hostess Cherry Fruit Pie to cheer her up.



Settings

Roanoke

Roanoke is a large town in southwestern Virginia. It is where Cece and her family move to from the city. Roanoke is full of friendly people and good neighbors, and Cece's family fits in there very well. However, Cece struggles with acceptance and fitting in because of her hearing concerns. It is in Roanoke that the majority of the novel takes place, from Cece's first grade year through her fifth. It is in Roanoke that Cece comes to find a true friend in Martha, develops a crush on Mike, grows closer with her parents, and finds the acceptance and confidence in herself that she has been seeking.

School

School is where Cece and her friends attend classes and learn various subjects. Cece's unnamed school is located in Roanoke, Virginia. It serves as a primary setting for much of the novel, for much of Cece's time is spent in school. There, Cece first comes to use the Phonic Ear, which makes her feel awkward at first, but later earns the praise and admiration of other students at the school when she and Mike conduct a range experiment. The school is where Cece and Mike participate in the book pageant, and where Cece first tells Mike about the power of her Phonic Ear. The school is also where the students make fuzzies and where Cece gives and receives a fuzzle from Mike. The school also serves as the place where Cece is accused of cheating and where Cece ultimately finds acceptance among her classmates.

Silver Spring

Silver Spring is a large town in Maryland, near Washington, D.C. It is in Silver Spring that an audiology technology company produces and repairs Phonic Ear devices. When Cece's Phonic Ear microphone is accidentally dropped and broken by Mr. Potts, the device must be sent to Silver Spring, Maryland, to be repaired. The process of shipping and repair takes over four weeks.

The City

The city –unnamed in the novel –is the original hometown of Cece and her family. She spends the first five years of her life in the city, where she is best friends with Emma. The city is where Cece contracts meningitis. She spends her first year of school in kindergarten in the city, at a special education school to deal with her deafness. The summer after kindergarten, Cece and her family move from the city to the town of Roanoke, Virginia.

The audiologist's office

The audiologist's office is where Cece is taken following her bout with meningitis and hearing loss. There, the audiologist runs a series of tests on Cece, during which time Cece hears various beeps –the first sounds she has heard in weeks. It is also at the audiologist's office that the audiologist fits Cece for wearing a hearing aid. Cece later returns to the audiologist's office to be given her brand new hearing aid.



Themes and Motifs

Acceptance

Acceptance is a major and important theme in the novel “El Deafo” by Cece Bell. Acceptance –fitting in –is of paramount importance to Cece. When the novel begins, Cece must be fitted for a hearing aid due to hearing loss as a result of contracting meningitis. It is a strange, baffling, and unusual experience for Cece, who up until that time, had a relatively normal and uneventful childhood. The use of hearing aids transforms her life dramatically from the very start, and from the moment she begins wearing the hearing aid, she longs to fit in among her family and friends, to be accepted by them, and to be accepted as normal.

When Cece begins wearing a hearing aid, she decides that she will wear the aid under her clothing, to make it as unnoticeable as possible. She doesn’t want anyone to see the hearing aid that hangs around her neck, though the cords to the earbuds she wears are still visible. She doesn’t want to wear the hearing aid, either, because no one else does. When kindergarten begins, Cece attends a different school than her childhood friend, Emma, instead going to a school for the disabled. There, Cece is in a class with several other kids, all of whom wear hearing aids. This makes her feel comfortable and accepted, and makes her feel as if she is among friends. Cece learns important lessons in the class, about how to get along among people with normal hearing abilities. These will be important lessons for her in the coming years.

After kindergarten ends, Cece and her family move to Roanoke, where Cece suddenly finds herself among kids with normal hearing. She struggles to fit in, but when so much of the local culture has to do with sound (the neighborhood kids seem to exist around radios), Cece finds it even harder to do so. She wants to draw as little attention to herself as possible, so she refuses to learn sign language, which she believes would draw attention to herself through the use of visual signals with her hands. Additionally, she hates when people attempt to speak to her using sign language, feeling singled out and abnormal. She just wants to be spoken to the way people regularly speak to one another. She especially hates being referred to as “special” because to her, “special” means “different”. In a large sense, she is correct. By attempting to downplay her disability and make her feel special for being different, others are actually making her feel different, rather than normal and accepted.

Throughout the novel, Cece often does things to go along with the flow, rather than try to understand what is going on. For example, while listening to the radio, Cece will laugh along with all the other kids, even though she has no idea what she is laughing at. When she watches television with her siblings or her parents, she rarely asks them about what is being said on television, but merely watches the pictures. When Cece must wear the Phonic Ear at school, even though her hearing increases dramatically, she does not tell anyone at all about her ability to hear teachers down the hall or in the lounge. In fact, Cece hates having to hand the microphone to teachers in front of all the



other kids, so that the teachers may speak into the microphone for Cece to hear what they are saying.

However, Cece finally finds acceptance at the end of the novel by embracing who she is when she works up the courage to begin talking to Mike, her crush. Rather than being put off by Cece's hearing aid, he is intrigued by it. He doesn't look at her as different, but as having an incredibly cool device that she uses. Indeed, he refers to her super-hearing as a superpower, which floors Cece. While conducting a range experiment with Cece's hearing aid, Mike intrigues all the other kids in the neighborhood, who think that what Cece and Mike are doing is really cool. Cece feels warm and accepted because of this, and even more so the next day, when she warns everyone that Mrs. Sinklemann is returning to the classroom. She is referred to as a hero for her actions. Rather than being the "deaf girl" or the "deaf friend," Cece becomes known as a good friend who just happens to be deaf. When Cece exchanges Fuzzies with other kids in class, she is amazed to see how many Fuzzies she has received, and the activity makes her feel welcome and wanted. She feels so accepted by the end of the novel that she decides to tell Martha all about El Deafo –one of the secrets Cece has jealously kept. Martha, like Mike, does not care at all about Cece's hearing aid. Martha is simply thrilled to have a friend like Cece. That is more than enough for her –hearing aid or not.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel "El Deafo" by Cece Bell. Throughout the novel, Cece struggles to find a true friend, like any normal kid might. However, Cece's attempts to make friends are often further frustrated by her hearing loss –or, in the case of the end of the novel, strengthened by it.

Cece's first best friend, Emma, is from her young childhood up through the age of five. Emma and Cece do everything together, from finding caterpillars together, to playing in the snow. However, when Cece contracts meningitis and suffers hearing loss, things begin to change. For the first time, Cece pays attention to the differences between them, none of which have mattered before –and still do not. For example, Emma is taller and thinner than Cece. However, with the hearing aid, a new difference between the friends is created which requires Cece to attend a special learning school while Emma attends a regular kindergarten class. Nevertheless, they do not let this get in the way of their friendship. Emma and Cece still play together, until the Bell family moves to Roanoke, and their friendship ends because of the move.

Cece's next best friend is a girl named Laura. Laura does not pay attention to Cece's hearing aid, which is a blessing for Cece. However, Laura is very bossy, very possessive, and very mean spirited. For example, Laura finds it funny that her dog bites Cece. Whenever Cece and Laura hang out, they only do the things that Laura wants to do. When Cece makes friends with new girls at Girl Scouts, Laura monopolizes Cece's time so that Cece cannot continue her friendship with the other girls. It gets so bad that Cece prays that God will put Laura in a different class the following year at school, and Cece is beyond thankful that He does.



As Cece's friendship with Laura fades out, Cece becomes good friends with a Georgia transplant named Ginny Wakeley. Ginny doesn't seem to mind Cece's hearing aid, which makes Cece happy. However, Ginny overcompensates by speaking loudly and slowly, imagining that Ginny not only has a hearing issue, but a comprehension issue as well. Cece puts up with Ginny's loudness because she is just happy to have a friend who is as thoughtful and kind as Ginny is. However, things soon become annoying for Cece, as Ginny's slow yelling and introducing Cece to everyone as her "deaf friend" grate on Cece's nerves. Eventually, Cece explodes, telling Ginny that she can't stand it. This causes the girls to grow apart.

Cece's next friend comes by way of a girl a year younger than her. Martha lives across the street, and she and Cece bond while making dirt soup together, and talking about the shows that they love. They begin doing everything together, from sleepovers to jumping on Mike's trampoline. Martha speaks to Cece like she is a normal person, and does not care about her hearing aid, which thrills Cece. Cece comes to discover she has a true friend in Martha, the perfect sidekick for El Deafo. When playing tag one day, Cece accidentally runs into a tree branch, and temporarily injures her eye. Martha blames herself, and stays away from Cece for much of the year, worried that she may again injure Cece. In the end, Cece tells Martha she is not responsible for the injury, and the girls get back to normal, and become even better friends as a result. Indeed, Cece lets Martha in on the secret of El Deafo as the novel concludes.

Struggle

Struggle is an important theme in the novel "El Deafo" by Cece Bell. Struggle involves various challenges that must be contended with, and overcome. In the novel, Cece deals with much struggle in her quest not only to be as normal as possible, but to make friends as well. Much of this struggle is attributed to her hearing condition, as well as the struggles of average kids to get by. (Two of these struggles –to find friends, and to find acceptance –are dealt with at great length as themes in and of themselves in this section of the study guide. Here, they are only briefly treated as a part of the greater theme of struggle, in general.)

Cece's greatest struggle comes with her hearing disability, brought on by meningitis. When Cece first discovers her hearing loss, she describes the world as being quiet. It makes Cece very unhappy. When she sees an audiologist after being released from the hospital, she hears her first sounds in two weeks. The audiologist outfits her with a hearing aid, which allows Cece to hear again. This makes her very happy, though she struggles to actually understand what people are saying. Cece spends her kindergarten year at a special education school, where her struggles to hear and make sense of what she is hearing are dealt with by way of visual clues and things like contextualization. Cece is further able to understand as she is taught to lip-read, though having to rely on her other senses also proves a struggle in some instances. For example, at Ginny's slumber party, Cece is not able to hear and understand what the other girls are saying in the dark, because she cannot see their faces to read their lips. The same is true of watching television, when the actors cannot always either clearly be seen, or seen at all.



At school, Cece's struggle to hear is offset by the use of the Phonic Ear, which allows the teacher to wear a microphone that transmits everything the teacher says directly to Cece's ears. Using the Phonic Ear, Cece can hear clearly and understand perfectly. However, the struggle to hear at school is often compounded by other problems, such as when Mr. Potts, the gym teacher, accidentally drops Cece's microphone, causing it to break. Cece's struggle to hear is also compounded by the fact that she ends up needing glasses in order to see things far away. This struggle continues until Cece is given a zero for suspicion of cheating on a vocabulary test, when she is merely asking her neighbors for help as to what the words written on the chalkboard are. Cece later gets a pair of glasses, which solves her problems of sight, and allows her to refocus her efforts on her academics.

Cece also struggles not only with hearing on its own, but with how it makes her different from everyone else around her. She struggles to fit in, to be accepted, and to make friends, but constantly feels different because she must wear a hearing aid, and because everyone keeps telling her she is "special" when all she wants to do is fit in with everyone else. She equates "special" with "different". Ginny attempts to handle Cece by nearly yelling instead of talking, to make sure Cece hears her, and by introducing Cece as her "deaf friend" to everyone, when Cece just wants to be introduced to others as Cece. Cece also goes through four close friends in the novel, struggling to find a friend who will accept her and who will not view her hearing loss as either a handicap, or even as a big deal. Cece ultimately finds this in Mike and Martha. This hurts Cece deeply, and she often has to struggle with not only finding the right friend, but with being alone. She handles her loneliness by watching television, daydreaming, and spending time with her family when she can.

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel "El Deafo" by Cece Bell. As a theme, family involves mutual love, compassion, and emotional and physical support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accordance with the traditional family unit. In the novel, Cece's relationship with her family proves to be crucial to her life –both before and after her meningitis and hearing impairment.

Before her hearing impairment, Cece explains that she is a normal girl with a normal upbringing, and a good family. She loves trying on her mom's makeup and going for bike rides with her dad. Cece's mother is a loving homemaker while Cece's father is a hard-working businessman. Both parents make time for their children, especially little Cece. Cece also enjoys spending time with her older brother and sister, Ashley and Sarah. Cece and her siblings often watch television together, including the show "Batman", which will prove influential later on in Cece's development of her alter-ego self, "El Deafo". By all appearances, Cece gets along quite well with her parents and her siblings, and she feels loved and accepted.

Following her meningitis, Cece's family goes through great lengths to make her feel better and feel comfortable once more. Ashley fills paper boats with candy and leaves



them all around the house for Cece, while Sarah sits up with Cece in the evenings until Cece falls asleep. Cece's father and mother spend as much time with her as possible – especially Cece's mom. Because she is a homemaker, Cece is able to remain by her side constantly, which helps Cece to feel safe and secure. This all proves to be especially important for Cece as she is diagnosed with deafness by an audiologist, and given a hearing aid to get by in the hearing world. For example, Cece's father brings her to see foreign language films with English subtitles, which Cece loves because she can read as well as see what is going on.

No matter what happens at school or beyond the confines of the home, Cece's family is always there for her. Cece is especially close to her mother, who proves to be a major source of compassion and support. When Cece is accused of cheating during a vocabulary test, Cece's mom knows better. She is well aware what her daughter is (honest) and what she is not (dishonest). Because they have a close relationship, Cece's mother is not afraid to ask about the incident, and Cece is not afraid to tell her mother the truth –that she merely could not see the board. When Cece injures her eye on a tree branch while out playing in the neighborhood, it is her mom she runs to and brings her to the doctor. When Cece's friendship with Martha is on the rocks, it is Cece's mom who is there for Cece, calling to discuss the situation with Martha's mom, and taking care of Cece in the process. When Cece leaves Ginny's slumber party early, Cece's parents allow her to stay up and watch television with them –a small but meaningful act which is invaluable to Cece.

Alter Ego

The idea of having an alter ego becomes an important theme in the novel “El Deafo” by Cece Bell. “El Deafo” is not merely the title of the novel, but is also the eponymous name of Cece's super hero alter ego, El Deafo. El Deafo primarily exists in Cece's mind, but she tries to make use of El Deafo in her daily life in different ways.

When Cece is diagnosed with hearing loss, she believes she is abnormal, less than average, and certainly not special or super. She is likewise very sweet, quiet, and patient. When she is forced to wear the Phonic Ear at school, she is less than thrilled. She goes through great lengths to hide the device under her clothing, and wishes the cords that attach the earpieces to the device were invisible as well. Ever a fan of Batman and superheroes, Cece comes to realize that the magnified hearing of the Phonic Ear, as well as the range of the microphone worn by the speaker, allow her to not only hear things loud and clear, but to hear things far away that she is not supposed to hear. For example, Cece can hear the teachers in the teacher's lounge complaining about problematic students. Cece realizes her Phonic Ear is akin to a superpower. With it, Cece has the superpower of super hearing. Later, while watching a TV movie with her brother and sister, Cece learns that one of the movie's characters calls another, hearing-impaired character “Deafo”. Meant as an insult on the show, Cece takes command of the name and uses it to her advantage by naming her super hero alter ego, “El Deafo”.



El Deafo is not only gifted with the super power of super hearing, but is also brave, loyal, and daring. Her courage is resounding even in the face of overwhelming adversity. El Deafo becomes both an escape and a role model for Cece numerous times throughout the novel. For example, whereas Cece is too shy at first to have a real conversation with Mike, El Deafo is able to speak to Mike without a problem. While Cece cannot stand to Laura's meanness, El Deafo can do so without a problem. Whereas Cece is embarrassed by her Phonic Ear, El Deafo uses her gift of super hearing to her advantage time and time again. Cece tries to be as brave and courageous as El Deafo in her own real world, but it never pans out.

Eventually, the alter ego of El Deafo does merge with Cece as Mike decides to try out a range experiment with Cece, the Phonic Ear, and the Phonic Ear's microphone. In so doing, the neighborhood kids get interesting in what is going on, and think what Mike and Cece are doing is really cool. The next day at school, Cece uses her Phonic Ear to alert her classmates as to when the teacher is coming. Everyone thinks Cece and her Phonic Ear are cool, and Mike tells Cece that she is a hero. As such, Cece and El Deafo have become one in the same, and Cece is finally able to live up to the expectations she sets for herself through her alter ego of El Deafo.



Styles

Point of View

Cece Bell tells her novel “El Deafo” in the first-person narrative mode, from the point of view of main character, Cece. The novel is semi-autobiographical, so it is only natural that the narrator should be the main character. The main character is a mostly-realistic representation of the author, Cece Bell. The main character and the author share the exact same name to underscore that the novel is semi-autobiographical. The first-person point of view in the novel also allows the reader to share Cece’s innermost thoughts, few of which she ever reveals to any of the other characters. The reader is given a privileged place in Cece’s mind and heart to understand and see and feel things the way that Cece herself feels and sees them.

Language and Meaning

Cece Bell tells her novel “El Deafo” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is that the target audience of the novel – youths and young adults – will need to connect with and understand the novel at their age and academic level. Secondly, the language also reflects the characters in the novel, primarily, the main character and narrator, Cece. The novel takes place during Cece’s time in elementary school. So, it is only natural that the language will be simple and straightforward to reflect the character’s academic level and the character’s age.

Structure

Cece Bell’s novel “El Deafo” is divided into twenty-one consecutive, chronological, and linear chapters that span the length of Cece’s life from the age of four to her fifth grade year. The book itself is a graphic novel, both written and illustrated by Cece Bell. The illustrations themselves are bright and colorful, and provide a clear representation of specific events and incidents, as well as important things like Cece’s Phonic Ear and microphone. This allows the reader to have an accurate visual understanding of the things that are written about.



Quotes

Everything is so quiet.

-- Cece (Chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: Following Cece's bout with meningitis, Cece develops deafness, though she doesn't understand it at first. To Cece, everything is quiet, but she doesn't equate the quiet surroundings with hearing loss.

An amazing thing happens inside the booth: I hear a beep!

-- Cece (Chapter 2 paragraph 20)

Importance: Following the realization that Cece has hearing loss, her parents take her to an audiology specialist, who runs tests on Cece. While undergoing the tests, Cece can hear beeps –the first such sounds she has heard in two weeks since being at the hospital.

Emma and I have always looked different from each other, but in ways that didn't matter.

-- Cece (Chapter 3 paragraph 3)

Importance: Prior to Cece's deafness, physical appearance matters little to none at all to her. She notes that she and her best friend, Emma, have always looked different, but it has never mattered at all until Cece must wear a hearing aid. It is something that markedly distinguishes her from Emma because the hearing aid itself is not natural to her body. Here, Cece demonstrates her self-consciousness about having to wear a hearing aid device.

Superheroes might be awesome, but they are also different. And being different feels a lot like being alone.

-- Cece (Chapter 4 paragraph 47-48)

Importance: Reflecting on superheroes, Cece understands that she can be like a superhero, too, with the superpower of super hearing. The superpowers of superheroes mark them and set them apart from regular people. Cece feels set apart from regular people, too. As a result of this feeling of separateness, she becomes very lonely.

It is time to push back!

-- Cece (Chapter 5 paragraph 51)

Importance: Cece, drawing on strength from El Deafo, decides that Laura's pushy, mean nature must be countered. Cece doesn't like being bossed around all the time. She decides it is time to stand up to Laura. Unfortunately, Cece is too shy and too kind to stand up to Laura.



Just call me El Deafo!

-- Cece (Chapter 7 paragraph 68)

Importance: While watching an ABC TV movie with her siblings, Cece learns that one character in the movie calls another deaf character “deafo” as an insult. Cece finds this mean, then funny. She decides to make the name her own by calling her superhero alter ego, “El Deafo.”

As far as ‘helping’ –it’ll help people stare at me, is what it’ll do. ‘Look at the deaf girl! Isn’t she special!

-- Cece (Chapter 9 paragraph 73)

Importance: Cece’s mom attempts to help Cece become oriented with sign language so that she might communicate more easily with others, and others with her. Cece, however, feels that using sign language merely draws attention to her through hand movement. She is trying to fit in, not stand out. By using sign language, everyone will look at her. They will refer to her as a “deaf kid.” She will be called “special.” To Cece, special means “different.” Cece does not want to be different. She longs to be accepted with everyone else.

What am I gonna do without her?

-- Cece (Chapter 12 paragraph 47)

Importance: After Cece finds a true friend in Martha, Martha becomes terrified when Cece is injured while playing tag. As a result, Martha leaves Cece alone, not wanting to injure her further. Martha blames herself for the initial injury, even though Cece says this isn’t true. Without Martha around, Cece feels very lonely. She wonders what she’ll do without Martha.

I love my glasses. Being able to see makes everything easier –especially at school.

-- Cece (Chapter 15 paragraph 1)

Importance: When Cece begins wearing glasses, she is thrilled to see everything at school more clearly. Because of this, she is able to focus on her academic work and make straight As. Interestingly enough, Cece’s glasses do not worry her the way her hearing aid worries her. It is interesting to note that she truly sees the usefulness of her glasses, but she cannot see or hear the usefulness of her hearing device.

Can I really do what Mike wants me to do?

-- Cece (Chapter 20 paragraph 10)

Importance: Mike, following a range experiment with Cece and the hearing aid, wants Cece to let everyone in class know when their teacher is approaching. Cece is delighted to be included in a plan, but she wonders whether she could get in trouble for being a lookout of sorts, or if she has the courage to be able to do so.



What a crazy couple of days it's been! I feel so different about a lot of things.
-- Cece (Chapter 21 paragraph 20-21)

Importance: As the novel winds down, Cece is thrilled with how things have turned out. She now feels accepted, and she accepts her hearing aid and deafness. She is closer with Mike and has renewed her friendship with Martha. As a result, she is much happier.

I think it's finally time to tell you all about... El Deafo!
-- Cece (Chapter 21 paragraph 59)

Importance: As the novel ends, Cece decides it is time to tell Martha all about El Deafo. She has never told anyone else about El Deafo before. This demonstrates just how much Martha's friendship means to Cece and how much Cece trusts Martha.