

The Fourteenth Goldfish Study Guide

The Fourteenth Goldfish by Jennifer L. Holm

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Plot Summary

Ellie is an 11-year-old girl who is having problems moving forward and finding her passion when her grandfather reenters her life as a 13-year-old boy due to his discovery of an age reversing formula. With his help, she finally understands the cycle of life, finds that science is her passion and starts to live.

One evening, Ellie is at home with her babysitter, Nicole, when her mother comes home with a strange 13-year-old boy. Finally, she realizes that the boy is really her grandfather, Melvin, something her mother already knows. He explains that a compound he made from an abnormal jellyfish caused him to transform from a 76-year-old man to his current state. Ellie's mother, Melissa, had had to pick him up at the police station because he was trying to get his work out of the lab and, since no one recognized him, he was taken in for trespassing. He tells Ellie that he has to figure out a way to get the T. melvinus out of the lab to continue his work and win a Noble Prize.

In the meantime, he has to live with Ellie and Melissa and attend Ellie's middle school. Being 13 years old in appearance, but having the mind of a 76 year old is not easy for Melvin. He has acne, knows more about science and history than his teachers, must adjust to middle school rules, and remembers when things, such as movies, were better. He also tries to play the father figure to Melissa, criticizing the way she dresses, her profession, her boyfriend, and her kissing in the driveway after a date. At the same time, however, he learns things that never registered with him during his original youth, such as the concepts that there is more to life than work and science and that drama is not a waste of time. He also learns the value of his unlikely allies, Ellie and a goth boy, Raj. Ellie helps him adjust to teenage life. She lends him acne cream and ponytail holders for his long frizzy hair. Together, Ellie and Raj make him aware of school rules and, due to them, he always has someone to eat with at lunch. Ultimately, with their help and imagination, he's finally able to obtain what he needs to continue his research and get a step closer to achieving his dream of winning a Nobel Prize.

With the prize in reach, however, Melvin decides to trash his findings as a result of Ellie's counsel. Through him she's realized that science is her passion, but she also understands the impact, both positive and negative, of scientific findings and realizes that some results may be better left unknown for the sake of mankind.

Melvin finally decides to move on and tour the country by bus, an unfulfilled dream of Ellie's deceased grandmother (Melvin's wife). Ellie embraces new friendships and the concept of discovery. Melissa finally marries her longtime boyfriend and the family looks to move to a new house.



Chapters 1 - 6

Summary

In Chapter 1, Ellie, the main character and narrator, tells readers about her experience with her pet goldfish. Her teacher had given each student in her class a goldfish to teach them about the cycle of life in a short amount of time, as goldfish don't have long life spans.

Ellie thinks her goldfish is original because it lives for seven years, but, when she finally finds her goldfish dead in its bowl, she discovers that her mother had replaced each previous goldfish upon its death. The one Ellie found was the thirteenth. They bury it and Ellie asks for a dog.

In Chapter 2, Ellie tells readers that she can't have a dog because the backyard is too small and there's no space for a dog to run around. The house has another problem. The toilet gets clogged a lot.

Ellie has a babysitter named Nicole. One day, the two of them are together at Ellie's house. Ellie is working on a puzzle. She loves puzzles because they involve figuring out how things fit together. Her divorced parents, who are still friends, are always encouraging Ellie to find her passion. They'd like it to be theater, but she knows that's not it. Nicole, who wants to be an actress, is surprised that Ellie is still working on the puzzle. After making that comment, she tells Ellie that her mother is going to be late because she has to get Ellie's grandfather from the police station. Ellie's grandfather doesn't live that far from her house, but she doesn't see him that often. He and her mother don't get along.

Ellie and Nicole try to figure out what Ellie's grandfather could have done that landed him at the police station. They rule out an accident because he doesn't drive. Then Nicole mentions her neighbor who has Alzheimer's and says that maybe Ellie's grandfather had run off. She goes on to say that the last time the neighbor had done that he was hit by a car. Realizing that she has scared Ellie, Nicole adds that she's sure that her grandfather is fine. She changes the subject and asks Ellie whether she would like to watch a movie.

Ellie is her bedroom in Chapter 3 -- a room she used to love. Ever since first grade, she and her best friend, Brianna, had painted the walls with handprints. But they hadn't done it that year because Brianna had found her passion, volleyball, and that was all she had time for now. Ellie wasn't even sure Brianna was still her friend.

It's late when her mother, Melissa (Lissa for short), finally arrives home. Ellie hears her talking to Nicole and joins them. After asking about Ellie's grandfather, Nicole announces that she can't babysit Ellie anymore because she has a job at the mall. The



news shocks Ellie. She stares outside to get one last look at her old babysitter. but sees a boy with long hair instead.

Lissa orders the boy to come inside. He tells her that she needs to put out the trash because the next day is trash day. He goes on to tell her the importance of maintaining her house. Ellie wonders who he is. Once in the house, he drills Ellie about her grades and tells her that she must get good ones if she's going to get into a good PhD program.

Melissa counters that an 11-year-old girl doesn't need to worry about a PhD program. He says that it's not too early to start. Then he changes the subject and criticizes the way Lissa is dressed and Ellie's pajamas. He asks Ellie if she's boy crazy like Lissa was. And even though Lissa denies being boy crazy he says she must have been to have eloped. She said she was in love. He says that a PhD lasts longer than love.

While all of this is going on, Ellie is still trying to figure out who the boy is. The exchange is familiar to her. She studies the boy and seeing a ring he's wearing makes her realize that the boy is her grandfather, Melvin.

In Chapter 4, the boy sarcastically confirms that he's Ellie's grandfather. Ellie asks whether magic caused his age change. The question angers Melvin because he thinks that Lissa is raising Ellie to believe in magic. He blames it on Lissa majoring in drama. Lissa blows him off.

Melvin explains that science caused his transformation. He says that he has found the fountain of youth and he'll win a Nobel Prize for it. Lissa yawns and announces that she's going to bed. Before going, she suggests that Melvin bond with his granddaughter.

Melvin and Ellie go into the kitchen. While Melvin eats, he tells Ellie that he was picked up by the police for trespassing. He had been trying to get into his lab. After eating, telling Ellie about all of his patents, and complaining about how the company had changed since being bought out by investors, he asks Ellie where he's going to sleep.

Chapter 5 starts with the next morning. As usual, Ellie is the first one up and starts making pancakes. She likes experimenting to make different types. Her mother hates cooking, but Ellie feels comfortable in the kitchen because of its order and the ability to experiment.

Melvin is next in the kitchen and complains about the toilet being clogged. Ellie tells him that it's normal. She notices that he has bed hair and that his hair is similar to hers. She offers him some spray to help tame it. He says that he has more serious things to worry about and explains that he has to get into the lab to get the jellyfish that had helped him discover the fountain of youth. He can't call his bosses to get in because they don't know he was working on the project and if they found out, they would take the credit.

Ellie starts to see her grandfather in a different light. She thinks he's interesting. When her mother comes in, she tells Melvin that he has to go to school. He tries to get out of it, but can't.



In Chapter 6, it's lunchtime at Ellie's middle school and she's looking for somewhere to sit. When she, her mother, her father (Ellie's parents are divorced), and her mother's boyfriend had gone out to eat to celebrate Ellie's graduation from elementary school, the two men had lamented that the real challenge would be getting through middle school. Now Ellie understands what they meant. She has a lab partner, Momo, who came from a different elementary school, there's a goth boy, and Brianna shows no commitment to their friendship.

Ellie can sit next to Momo, but chooses to sit next to Brianna instead. Brianna has cut her hair so short that the two can no longer share ponytail holders or even have the same hairstyle like they used to because Ellie's hair is too frizzy. They play a game they have always played built around crispy corn dogs. But when Ellie offers Brianna's hers, she refuses because of her volleyball diet. What's more, she turns down Ellie's invitation to spend the night at her house. Brianna even leaves the table with her team before Ellie can say goodbye.

Just as Ellie starts to feel sorry for herself Melvin appears. She tries to play the corn dog game with him, but he doesn't get it. He does eat her corn dog, however.

Analysis

The first six chapters lay the framework for the themes of friendship, the cycle of life, overcoming challenges, and stereotypes. They also introduce many of the book's characters.

Ellie is both the main character and the narrator. When readers first meet her, she is dealing with a lot of changes and missing a lot of things from the past. She is moving from elementary school to middle school. Her babysitter has just quit to take another job. She finds out that she has had thirteen goldfish instead of one. On top of all of that, her best friend is no longer committed to their friendship. Ellie doesn't like change. In fact, one of the reasons she likes cooking is because of its order. As a result, she misses her old school, her old friend, her babysitter as she leaves the house, and her goldfish.

Through Ellie's changing relationship with Brianna, the theme of friendship starts to emerge. How could two people have been so close and then one drift from the other in the course of a few months? What happens to the friend who is left behind? What should that person do about the situation? Should they try to resurrect the friendship or should they accept the situation and move on?

Ellie already wonders herself if Brianna is her friend and is beginning not to love the way her room looks so much. But she doesn't like change. So in an effort to keep things the way they were, she tries to resurrect the friendship. She sits next to Brianna. She plays the corn dog game with her. She offers her a corn dog as a sign of friendship. And she invites Brianna over to her house.



For her part, Brianna doesn't totally reject Ellie. She talks to her when she sits next to her in the lunch court. she plays the crispy corn dog game. But when it comes to signaling that she's committed to their friendship, she shows that her commitment is now to volleyball. She has cut her hair in a style that Ellie can't mimic and doesn't require ponytail holders. She refuses the corn dog Ellie offers her because her volleyball diet doesn't include such foods. And she doesn't suggest a time when she can go over to Ellie's house as she could have after refusing Ellie's invitation.

Ellie is able to share her corn dog with someone, however. That person is Melvin. While he doesn't get the corn dog game, he shares a meal with Ellie and meals are a symbol of harmony. Through this act, plus the fact that Ellie finds him interesting, readers see the beginning of a new friendship for Ellie and a family bond that hadn't previously existed.

Melvin's relationship with Melissa is not so positive. His comment blaming a major in drama for Ellie's question about whether magic had caused the reduction in his age shows that he has a negative view of drama. Melissa's disinterest in his age reversal discovery shows that she does not have a positive view of science. She even yawns after he talks about his discovery and she doesn't eat with Melvin as Ellie does. In addition, Melvin doesn't approve of anything that Melissa does. He criticizes how she manages the house, her profession and her wardrobe. He also shows no love for her ex-husband implying that she would have been better off getting a PhD.

The two have different and conflicting priorities. Melissa believes in love. Melvin believes in science - even more so now that his main goal is to get the formula so that he can win the Nobel Prize.

It's interesting that Melvin appears soon after Ellie tells the story of having a goldfish to learn about the cycle of life because Melvin's discovery interrupts the cycle of being born, reproducing, living, and then dying. He is preserving himself. At the same time, Ellie is also holding on to the past, or at least trying to. But things are moving on around her. Brianna is moving on now that she has found her passion. Nicole is moving on to what she thinks is a better job. Ellie, however, is stuck -- just like the toilet.

This is a challenge that she is going to have to overcome. But she isn't the only one with a challenge they they need to overcome. Melvin needs to figure out how to get in the lab to get the jellyfish.

Ellie also has to overcome the challenge of finding her passion. These chapters give hints of what that passion may be. Readers know that she likes doing puzzles because she likes seeing how things fit together. They also know that she likes to cook because she likes to experiment and she likes the order of the kitchen. A point about passion that this section also makes is that parents often hope their children will follow the passion they have. Ellie's parents hope her passion will be theater. Melvin wanted Melissa's passion to be science. When children take other paths, parents may not accept their choice, as Melvin does not accept Melissa's.



Melissa also is going to have to overcome the challenge of raising two children -- Ellie and Melvin -- while one child, Melvin, is still trying to raise her through lectures about taking the garbage out, maintaining the house, and what to wear.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Ellie's mother hide the fact that her goldfish had died from her? Why did she finally decide to tell Ellie that she had had thirteen goldfish?

Discussion Question 2

Why hadn't Ellie found her grandfather interesting before?

Discussion Question 3

What causes the change in Ellie's and Brianna's friendship?

Vocabulary

wry, lecture, optional, flab, mystified, Alzheimer's, battered, frazzled, fertilized, maintain, competitive, PhD, elope, senescence, exasperated, regeneration, layman, perils, trespassing, patents, investors, mechanism, bicker, anomalies, compound, specimen, truant, bargain, hitchhike, capable, custody, exchange, goth



Chapters 7 - 12

Summary

Chapter 7 starts with Ellie and Melvin on the school bus on their way home after school. Melvin is complaining about middle school in general and the science curriculum in particular. The books don't mention his name and they don't talk about Sagarsky. Raj, the goth kid, overhears the conversation and responds that Sagarsky probably isn't mentioned because he's a quack, according to his science teacher. Raj and Ellie introduce themselves to each other and say goodbye to each other when Melvin and Ellie get off the bus. Melvin does not approve of the exchange.

Later that night, Lissa announces that she's cast the leads for the next play she's directing, *Our Town*. She proposes that they order takeout to celebrate. Melvin only wants Chinese, even though Lissa tries to convince him to try something different as he always wants Chinese. She gives in when Ellie orders wonton soup. Melvin thinks that his order won't be to his liking, but it is.

As they eat, Melvin and Melissa argue about the merits of *Our Town*. The phone rings and Ellie answers it. It's her father who is on the road acting in a play. Ellie misses him. She tells him about the clogged toilet and he promises to come over and fix it when he returns. When he finds out that Melvin is there (Ellie just says that her grandfather is over for dinner), her father guesses that they are eating Chinese. He says that Melvin will never change. Ellie says that she doesn't know about that.

Ellie and Melvin are late for school in Chapter 8 because Melvin had to finish printing something from the Internet. As a result, Ellie doesn't have time to get her science book from her locker. When the teacher tells everyone to open their books in class. Momo offers to share hers with Ellie. Ellie accepts.

At lunch, Ellie looks for Brianna, but doesn't see her. Instead she hears Melvin calling her over. She notices his outfit which is interesting, but works on him. When she sits down, he shows her the articles he had printed that morning. They were his and he wanted to show them to Raj. Ellie also finds out that he has a fan club in Finland. All of this impresses Ellie. Melvin admits that his fan club is rather small, but he says he'll be the next Jonas Stalk when people find out about his discovery. As Ellie does not know who that is, Melvin explains. He says that she doesn't know who he is because people spend too much time rooting for an idiot with a ball. Ellie realizes that he's talking about Brianna who is playing with her volleyball friends. Ellie manages to look away.

In telling Ellie about Stalk, Melvin mentions that scientists are a bit mad and that they don't give up because they believe in the possibility of finding the answer. Suddenly things click for Ellie and she tells Melvin that she knows where they can find Raj.



Ellie and Melvin find Raj in Chapter 9 and Melvin shows him the papers. Raj, however, dismisses them because the articles are so old. When Melvin accuses Raj of not knowing anything because he's a kid, Raj reminds him that he's one, too.

Raj's ride comes and he leaves. Melvin and Ellie go home, too. As they eat burritos, Ellie asks Melvin questions about science and he answers. They start talking about labs and Melvin says that he'll need one once he gets the T. melvinus (the jellyfish). They choose to set one up in the garage. The only problem is that Melissa's prop boxes are in the way. So they move them. When Melissa arrives, she can't park her car and makes them put everything back the way it was in spite of Melvin's complaint that she is standing in the way of science.

Ellie starts researching some of the names her grandfather has been talking about in Chapter 10 in order to write a school report. While she's working, her grandfather barges into the room, criticizes the handprints and asks for acne cream. She gives him some.

That night they order Chinese and Ellie observes how Melvin treats Melissa like a child. After dinner, Melvin asks whether he can borrow the car. Melissa says he can't which starts a discussion about how many times she had borrowed his car and an accident she had had. Melissa defends herself.

Melvin wants the car to go to the lab, but because he's not supposed to go near there, he can't ask Melissa to drive him there. So he figures out another form of transportation. The next day, he tells Ellie they are staying on the bus because they are going to the lab.

They arrive at the lab in Chapter 11. Melvin sends Ellie in thinking that she looks like such a sweet kid no one will ask any questions. But the plan fails and they end up having to run away and hide. Even so, Melvin tells Ellie that he is proud of her because she tried, even though she failed. That's what scientist do. Ellie asks if he thinks that she will win a Nobel Prize. He says she will and Ellie believes him.

Ellie also learns that her grandmother used to love to ride the bus, had wanted to take a bus trip across the country and loved to wear slippers so much that Melvin had given her a pair every year for their anniversary. They had never taken the bus trip because Melvin had been too busy.

Melvin and Ellie go to the movies in Chapter 12. Melissa has a date with Ben and they drop them off -- not before Melvin makes a negative comment about her outfit, though. Ben has asked Melissa to marry him twice, but she has said no because she's afraid of making another mistake. He says that he will wait for her forever.

After the movies, while they wait for Melissa and Ben to pick them up, Melvin criticizes a young boy on a skateboard, the raisinets, and the quality of movies these days. Then he sees an old lady pushing an old man in a wheelchair. He tells Ellie about the terrible things that happen when one gets old and says that he'd rather be dead than old.



Analysis

Chapters 7 through 12 continue to show how Ellie is moving on from the disappointment of Brianna's shifting commitment and adjusting to her life in middle school. When she doesn't have her book in science class, Momo offers to share hers and Ellie accepts. On the bus she introduces herself to Raj. She had thought Raj and Momo were strange at the beginning of the novel; Momo because she had come from a different elementary school and Raj because he was a goth kid. When she doesn't see Brianna at lunch, she doesn't go looking for her. Instead she sits with Melvin. When Melvin criticizes Brianna, not only does Ellie look away, she doesn't defend her.

These chapters also help readers learn more about Melissa and her passion, the theater. After casting her leads, she wants to order takeout to celebrate. And her excitement over the upcoming production is so strong that she stands up to Melvin when he dismisses the value of the play by calling it boring and a snooze. She expresses her spirit and her love for drama through her dress. She colors her hair blue and she wears clothes that Ellie describes as being hip. At the same time, though she is grounded. She likes Ben because there is no drama. You get what you see. The fact that Lissa appreciates this characteristic breaks the stereotypical view that people in theater and the arts in general are dramatic themselves and have their heads in the clouds.

Readers also learn that Melissa has developed a fear of commitment. She had eloped with her ex-husband, but now she has turned down a man who loves her, who Ellie likes, and whom she seems to love as well because she doesn't want to make another mistake. She's stuck, just like Ellie at the beginning of the novel and the toilet. This is a challenge that she needs to overcome.

While Ellie spends more and more time learning from her grandfather, she's right when she says that she doesn't share her parents' passion for drama. She agrees that Our Town is boring and says that the only reason her mother likes to put it on is because the number of roles means that she can cast a lot of students. She says that the way her mother dresses is more hip than the way she dresses and she doesn't understand why someone in drama would like a relationship that doesn't involve drama. As she has no feeling for the field, she also carries some of the stereotypical views of it.

Melvin doesn't even try to show any interest in Melissa's work. Her attempt to change his mind not only shows her passion but also the difficulties that can exist in family relationships when a child chooses a career that the parent thinks has no value. Children often try to make their parents understand, even when they are adults. And even though the children are successful (Melissa has a job in her field that gets her excited and allows her to raise Ellie) parents still may not give their children the praise they desire. What will happen in this family when the reverse occurs -- the parents with a passion for drama discover that their daughter has a passion for science? Readers don't find out in this section, but the story is setting itself up to answer that question.



Moving Lissa's props in favor his lab also shows Melvin's and Ellie's lack of understanding and respect for Melissa's line of work.

Readers also learn more about Ellie's family life in general. She loves her father and likes Ben because he loves her mother but doesn't try to be her father. And her grandmother is dead. Ellie tells readers about her through the eyes of Melvin, who had loved her. His description of her shows the reader a different Melvin. This is not the emotionless scientist who has no sense of romance. Another stereotype disproved.

Melvin's discovery may have turned his body into that of a 13-year-old, but he has his mind and this fact poses a problem. He treats Melissa as if she were a child, as many parents treat their older children, but in this case, he's the child. Raj reminds him of this when Melvin accuses him of not knowing anything because he is a child and Raj replies that he is a child, too. Getting used to be perceived as being young even though he isn't mentally isn't the only challenge he has to overcome. He's finding out that being 13 now is not as fun as it was when he was really 13. The Raisinets are not as good, the movies are not as good, and kids do dangerous things like skateboarding. Still, he prefers his current state to being old.

Discussion Question 1

How do you think the relationship between Ellie's divorced parents influences her?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the challenges Mellisa is facing with her teenage father in her house?

Discussion Question 3

Does the country really pay more attention to a person with a ball than science? Support your answer.

Vocabulary

quack, charlatans, glowers, cast, leads, belligerent, snooze, hallmark, flair, virtual, spikes, vaccine, polio, fronds, genome, precision, methodically, dormant, immortal, prop, battered, transcripts, placating



Chapters 13 - 17

Summary

Ellie has noticed that Melvin has a few quirks and one thing she knows for sure is that if he says he's going to do something, he does it. So when he doesn't show up one day after school, Ellie gets worried. Raj sees her looking for him and aids in the search. Finally they find out that he's in detention.

Raj keeps Ellie company while she waits for him to come out. They start talking with each other. Raj says that he thinks Melvin has a strange sense of style for a teenager. He says that he dresses like his grandfather. Ellie changes the discussion about style to Raj's own style. She asks him about an earring he's wearing. It's the Egyptian symbol of life and is called an Ankh. He goes on to tell Ellie that the Egyptians left the heart in mummies because they thought that thinking was done with the heart.

Melvin interrupts the discussion as he comes out of detention. He was there because he had gone to the bathroom without getting a pass first. He complains that the rules are stupid and also complains about the qualifications of his history teacher who had sent him to detention. He says that she's too young to teach the subject. When the kids suggest that he should just follow the rules, he says that he has his dignity and stomps off. Ellie realizes that Melvin does have a flair for drama in spite of what her mother thinks.

Lissa comes home early in Chapter 14 and decides to cook because she feels as if she's been neglecting Ellie a bit. When she's finished, the kitchen is a mess and the food is unrecognizable and tastes awful. They end up ordering Chinese.

The next day, while he's in the kitchen with Ellie, Melvin says that if Melissa had paid more attention to chemistry and less to theater, she would be able to cook. Ellie wants to know what cooking has to do with chemistry and Melvin explains. During the explanation he talks about science's contribution to preserving food. Then he suggests that the two of them cook dinner together.

Melissa keeps her mother's recipes in a box and pulls them out sometimes just to look at her mother's handwriting. Melvin pulls one out for coq au vin. It's marked that it's his favorite dish. He and Ellie start cooking. Melvin cleans up after himself just like Ellie. During the process, Ellie begins to see the similarity between the kitchen and a lab.

When Melissa gets home, she recognizes the aroma and after tasting it, says that it tastes just like her mother's. Her praise pleases Melvin.

Raj shows up at Ellie's house in Chapter 15. Ellie is surprised to see him, but she's even more surprised to find out that he's there to see Melvin, knows about Melvin's discovery and that he's now Melvin's lab assistant. The last bit of news hurts Ellie because she



had considered herself to be Melvin's lab assistant. But then Raj tells her that Melvin really needs him because he has an older brother with a car.

Melvin's new plan to get into the lab is to have Raj create a distraction while he uses his security card to get the T. melvinus. He decides that they should go on a night when Melissa is working late. Melvin borrows some of Melissa's clothes so that he's all dressed in black. While he's getting ready, Ellie is in her room trying to find out more information about bacteria and pasteurization. She begins to think that she would like to have something named after her.

When it's time to go, Raj's brother drives them to the lab. While Raj and Melvin put the plan into action, Raj's brother asks Ellie whether they do that sort of thing often. She admits that she's done it once before. In the end, Raj and Melvin run to the car without the T. melvinus because Melvin's security card has been deactivated.

In Chapter 16, Melissa, Ellie, and Melvin go to Melvin's old apartment so that he can pick up some of his things. They leave later than Melvin would have liked because Melissa is not an early riser. On the way, they see a billboard for a biotech company with a picture of a type of bacteria on it. Ellie recognizes it. Melissa asks Melvin if he's brainwashing her daughter. Melvin says that Ellie has an aptitude for science that she should encourage. Ellie realizes that he's right and it was there all along. She just needed her grandfather to bring it out of her.

Before going to his apartment, they stop by the house Melissa grew up in. Melvin and Melissa share fond memories of Melissa's mother and they even laugh together. Ellie can't remember much about her grandmother, but she does remember a feeling -- the feeling that there was more laughing and less shouting when she was around.

Next, they go to Melvin's old apartment. It is like a time warp with many memories of Melissa's mother, even the furniture. Melvin tells Ellie to get a suitcase for him from the bedroom. She finds her grandmother's dresser neat and dusted while Melvin's is a mess. She gets the suitcase and finds a pair of slippers that seem to be waiting for her grandmother's return. She takes them with her.

Chapter 17 finds the kids back in the lunch court. Melvin draws attention to himself because of his outfit. He doesn't like to do laundry so when he runs out of clothes he creates outfits from Melissa's closet. When he reaches Ellie he complains that he has to read *The Catcher in the Rye*. He hates the main character, Holden because he whines too much. This same character is one of Lissa's heroes. Melvin doesn't consider the book to be a classic and says that he's sure Newton wouldn't have wasted his time reading stuff like that.

Ellie doesn't know who Newton is, so Melvin explains the laws of motion. While he's talking, Ellie sees Brianna with her volleyball teammates and thinks that there should be a law of friendship. Raj joins Ellie and Melvin. He comments on Melvin's outfit and Melvin comments on Raj's new piercing. He asks Raj why he does that to himself and



Raj explains that it's self-expression. Melvin says that he'll be sure to explain that to Harvard.

Raj goes home with Melvin and Ellie. When they get there, he asks Raj whether he knows anyone who can help them break into the lab. Raj wonders why Melvin thought he would and Melvin says he just thought he might. Then he tells Raj that he's on the clock so start thinking of a way to get in.

Raj and Ellie brainstorm ideas while eating burritos. Ellie feels as if they are working on a project like Oppenheimer and his team and think they should name the project. While they are working, Melvin rushes into the room. He can't access his email account and all of his contacts are there. He doesn't even know the name of the guy who found the T. melvinus. Melvin thinks he knows who's responsible and compares the man to Holden. Raj comments that *The Catcher in the Rye* is a good book.

Analysis

This section of the book continues to focus on the themes of friendship, the cycle of life, love and family relationships, overcoming challenges, and stereotypes.

Ellie still feels pain when she sees Brianna to the point that she creates what should be a law of friendship declaring that one friend just can't stop and change directions without the other friend. Still, she is making progress in moving on. She no longer rushes to join Brianna when she sees her. She and Melvin hang out together not because he's her grandfather and she has to watch out for him, but because he's also her friend. They wait for each other after school and she's worried when he doesn't show up. They regularly eat lunch together and she enjoys cooking with him. An interchange exists between the two of them that she used to have with Brianna. She teaches him things (how to stay out of detention, for example) and he teaches her things about science.

In this section, Raj becomes a member of Ellie's inner circle as well. He keeps her company while she waits for Melvin to get out of detention. He eats burritos (her favorite food) with her and he's welcomed into her home. Raj is such a good friend that he senses Ellie's feelings. He can tell that she's hurt when she finds out that Melvin has hired him and while Melvin rambles on about qualifications, Raj tells Ellie that his real qualification is the fact that he has an older brother with a car.

Ellie loves her grandfather now that she knows him on a different level. Strain still exists between Melissa and Melvin who have a more traditional father and daughter relationship. There was a common bond in their household, though, and that was Ellie's grandmother. Melissa had loved her. She kept her recipe box, not necessarily to cook, but to immerse herself in her mother's memory by looking at her handwriting. She had cried when her mother died. Melvin had also loved her. He keeps old furniture because she had picked it out. His stuff is a mess, but he keeps her dresser dusted and orderly. He has even preserved her favorite thing -- a pair of slippers. They are there as if they are waiting for her to come back.



When they go to the old house, she's there in spirit and this unites them. They talk without arguing and laugh. The feeling that Ellie remembers about her grandmother still lives on.

In this sense, this section focuses on mortality, part of the cycle of life. Once one's body leaves this earth, their memory and the feeling they generated can be resurrected and influence the living. This is the natural flow of the cycle of life. This section also brings into view another group who, like Melvin, try to intervene in the cycle of life's flow. The Egyptians loved life so much that they even had a symbol for it. And when they died, they left the heart in the mummies. Could this be so that they could still think when their spirits returned?

Raj knows a lot about the ancient Egyptians and Melvin realizes that he's smart. He makes the comment that he'll explain Raj's form of self expression to Harvard, implying that Raj is Harvard material. On the flip side, though, he asks Raj whether he knows anyone who knows how to break into buildings. Because Raj is different, Melvin can't get rid of the stereotype that Raj knows criminals, even though he knows that Raj is not one himself. This confuses Raj. And it's ironic that Melvin thinks this when in fact, he is the one breaking and entering, a fact not lost of Raj's brother.

Even though Melvin now has a car, his plan to get in the lab still remains an obstacle that he must overcome. The stakes rise as he loses access to his email account which contains all of his contacts. But even though he continues to fail, he doesn't give up -- giving Ellie a real life lesson on what scientist do.

In this section, Ellie realizes that she had been doing things all along that pointed to her passion. She liked to work on puzzles and she liked to cook. But, like she says, she needed someone like her grandfather to help her see what it was. People trying to find their passion should look at what they like to do and try to tie that to a profession. And if they can, find a mentor as such a person may be able to take them further, faster.

It's ironic that Melissa now accuses Melvin of brainwashing Ellie as he had done in the first section. And he says that she should encourage Ellie's interest in science, because he approves of it, even though he has never encouraged Melissa's interest in drama. The question still remains as to rather she will be able to do so as she hold her own stereotypical view of science.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the Egyptians thought that thinking was done with the heart? Are their any characters in the book who would agree with this theory? Disagree? If so, who are they and why would they feel this way?



Discussion Question 2

Why do people keep objects that belonged to those they loved but are now deceased? Is there any value in doing so? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Melvin thinks that his history teacher is too young to teach the subject. What qualifies does a teacher need to teach a subject well?

Vocabulary

quirk, digestion, blunt, polyester, hieroglyphic, mummy, facilities, dignity, flourish, pasteurization, miracle, cuisine, dumbfounded, qualifications, ironic, diversion, idling, biotech, brainwashing, aptitude, lavender, periodicals, drivel, external, staph, withering



Chapters 18 - 23

Summary

In Chapter 18, Ben is treating the family to a dinner at the Mexican restaurant the has Ellie's favorite burritos. Melvin insists on wearing a coat and tie. When they arrive, he complains because he thinks the place is cheap and says that they should have gotten Chinese instead. Ellie defends the restaurant and Lissa glares at him, but her expression changes completely when she sees Ben. He is also wearing a suit due to a previous meeting with a client.

Marvin orders much more food than anyone else. Ben looks envious as he watches him eat. He says he used to be able eat like that, but can't anymore if he wants to remain fit. He starts asking Marvin questions about school. Marvin burps during the conversation. Lissa chides him for being rude, but he explains that burping, and expelling gas as Ellie adds, are natural digestive processes. Ben says that Melvin must be learning something in school. Melvin turns the conversation back to Ben. He starts asking the same type questions a father would ask his daughter's boyfriend the first time they meet. When he finds out that Ben has a PhD from MIT, he's slightly impressed, but thinks that Ben is wasting it working for a start-up game company. Melissa defends his job, saying that it's an artistic field. Melvin continues with his line of questioning. Finally it seems as if Melvin is going to ask Ben his intentions towards Melissa. Melissa warns him not to do it. Instead he asks about Ben's intentions for his last taco.

Ellie and Melissa go grocery shopping in Chapter 19. Melissa complains about all of the food that Melvin eats and Ellie reminds her that at least she doesn't have to pay for a babysitter. Then Melissa complains about Melvin nagging her about putting the trash out at night. Ellie starts telling Melissa things about Melvin that she doesn't know, including the fact that he has a fan club, and she praises scientists.

Melissa realizes that Ellie has an interest in science and explains why she hated it growing up. Ellie has a counter argument for the points Melissa makes. Finally when Melissa asks what scientist are in love with, Ellie says it's "possibility."

As Ellie puts the shopping cart back, she pays attention to the protesters who are outside. One is her science teacher who's protesting against nuclear weapons. Ellie tells him that she thought that the atomic bomb was a good thing because it ended the war. He tells her that this is true, but now that it exists it could start a larger war.

The next morning, Melvin gets into big trouble because he put the garbage out at night and the raccoons got into it. Melissa tells him that's why she doesn't put it out at night. Then she makes him clean it up and adds that maybe his fan club can help him.



It's Halloween in Chapter 20. Ellie is too old to go trick-or-treating so she and Melvin are going to a dance party at the youth center held by the town. Raj is also going. She asks Momo, but she has to take her little brother trick-or-treating.

In the past she had coordinated costumes with Brianna, but she knows that won't be happening this year. She searches for a costume that defines her and decides to be a Mad Scientist. Her mother and Ben also dress up to distribute candy. Melissa is Little Bo Peep, but Ellie gives the most credit to Ben's costume. He's a sheep with a sign saying that he's not lost, he just hates asking for directions. Melissa jokes that Melvin is going as an old man because he refuses to dress up.

Melissa takes them to the party. Melvin and Ellie wait for Raj. He dresses as a Preppy person. Melvin goes to the food table, but he's disappointed to find out that there are no caramel apples. Raj asks Ellie to dance. Normally she does not like to dance and especially not in public, but she does and has a great time. When she and Raj leave the dance floor, they look for Melvin. When they find him they see that he has fallen asleep like an old man.

Ellie celebrates her twelfth birthday in Chapter 21. Things feel different to her now. Her father calls to wish her a happy birthday. Brianna leaves a card in her locker, but it is nothing compared to what she did the previous year. Her day at school gets better when Raj gives her a present at lunchtime. It's a burrito from her favorite Mexican place.

For her birthday dinner Ellie surprises her mother by requesting to go to a French restaurant instead of her favorite Mexican place. Melvin approves of her choice. She orders coq au vin and is happy to have cheese for dessert. Her mother gives her a gift card to a place that sells hair accessories, a puzzle, and a cell phone. Receiving the cell phone excites Ellie, but she's even more excited when she receives a microscope from Melvin. The news that the cell phone wasn't the best present ever disappoints Melissa.

Melvin experiences real growing pains in Chapter 22. He thinks that the T. melvinus is regenerating his bones and takes pain killers to relieve the pain.

After lunch, Ellie's father makes a planned visit to fix the toilet. He does that, cooks dinner, and meets Melvin. Ellie's father says that Melvin reminds him of Ellie's grandfather, but they don't dare let him in on the secret because the two men never really got along. The family has a nice dinner with the exception of Melvin acting like a sullen teenager. During the evening he drinks wine to ease the pain, against Ellie's advice. Later the adults hear the toilet flushing more than once. Melissa asks Ellie's father if he fixed the toilet. He says he did. They check and find that Melvin is throwing up. Melissa thinks it's food poisoning, but Ellie's father realizes that Melvin has been drinking wine.

Melvin is grounded at the beginning of Chapter 23. Raj and Ellie are waiting for him after school. When he arrives he breaks the news that his email account was closed because the company has been bought and is moving to Malaysia. Now it's more important than ever that he gets the T. melvinus.



When they get to Ellie's house, a pizza is delivered there by mistake. This gives Ellie the idea that they can sneak into the lab by pretending to be delivering a pizza. Raj can be the delivery man. Everyone thinks it's a good idea, but Raj's brother's car ends up in the shop the night they are supposed to go. While they are trying to decide what to do, Ellie looks at her puzzle. It has taxis in it. This gives her the idea that they can take a cab.

Analysis

Chapters 18 to 23 continue to focus on the themes of stereotypes, the cycle of life, overcoming challenges, and family relationships.

In Chapter 18, Ben tells Melvin that he has a PhD from MIT and he works for a start-up that develops games. Melvin thinks that he's wasting his education working for a mere game development company and a start-up at that. But Ben's line of work breaks a stereotype about scientists and technical people. These people don't have to sit in labs performing research or have what others may consider to be boring jobs. They can work for creative companies and create fun and creative things. Neither Melvin nor Melissa realize that science or technology can coexist with creativity. Both think of scientists as people doing research and striving to win Nobel prizes. Even though he's educating Ellie about science and scientists, Melvin fails to see the commercial application in the modern world. For her part, Melissa sees the artistic side of Ben's work, but not the technical or scientific side.

Ellie, though, sees science beyond its stereotypical image. She sees the drama, the passion, the excitement, and the romance. She tells her mother about all of these elements during their conversation at the grocery store and convinces her mother that her stereotypical view of science is wrong. This interchange mirrors the discussion Melissa had with Melvin about the play *Our Town*: This difference is that while Melvin refuses to listen to Melissa's point of view, Melissa listens to Ellie and in the end appears to see her point. There's hope that Melissa will support Ellie in following her passion unlike Melvin who had not done the same for her.

When Ellie gives her mother her take on science, her mother's face softens. She realizes that Ellie knows what she's talking about and at this time, she may be realizing that Ellie has found her passion. And she sees signs of Ellie growing up and going through the cycle of life. But at the same time she tries to hold on to the old Ellie, her little girl. She tells Ellie that there's paint for the handprints. She thinks Ellie is going to want to go to the Mexican place for her birthday dinner. For her birthday she gives Ellie presents that Ellie was interested in at the beginning of the novel, when she was stuck. The hair accessories, the puzzle, and the cell phone. Before finding her passion and meeting her new friends, Ellie would have been happy with these things. But now she is ready to take the next step in her life, and for that, the microscope is the perfect present. She's ready to view life through a different lens.

There are other examples of Ellie gaining confidence and using the power of observation a scientist would use. She comes up with the idea to use pizza delivery to



get into the lab and she comes up with the idea of going by cab by linking two things -- what she sees and the problem.

Ellie is overcoming her obstacles, but the stakes have risen once again for Melvin now that he knows that the lab is moving. He has to work quickly to reach his goal.

Melissa also has obstacles to overcome. She loves Ben, her expression changes completely when he enters the room. She still won't marry him, though. The comfortable relationship she has with Ellie's father is about to change as he is going to be traveling more often. And her daughter is growing up. Seeing Ellie and watching her move on though seems to resonate with Melissa as evidenced by the looks she gives Ellie each time she notices a change.

In this section, Melissa must once again be Melvin's parent. she grounds him for drinking wine and she makes him clean up the trash after the raccoon attack.

Discussion Question 1

How has Raj filled the void left by Brianna?

Discussion Question 2

Ellie's father says that Melvin reminds him of Ellie's grandfather. Do you think that people are born with personality traits that they will always have? Support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Should people with PhDs only perform research? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

courteous, linoleum, fancy, client, envious, improvises, inquiring, start-up, migraine, intentions, smirk, passionate, wardrobe, preppy, undertow, wit, intimate, regenerating, rake, tinkers, reciprocate, yapping, punk, knocked-up, union, congregating



Chapters 24 - 29

Summary

In Chapter 24, the pizza delivery plan works and the team finally gets the T. melvinus. They go to a Chinese restaurant to celebrate. Raj suggests that they order jellyfish and they do. Raj tries it first and Ellie asks what it tastes like. He says like rubber and Ellie starts the same game she used to play with Brianna. Except this time she uses the jellyfish as the subject instead of the corn dog. Raj gets it right away and plays Brianna's old role.

Melvin wonders what he should wear to the Nobel Prize ceremony. Raj asks Ellie what they should wear. Melvin hadn't considered them going to the ceremony, but he agrees that they have a right to go after they remind him that they helped get the T. melvinus. He still insists on getting primary authorship.

Ellie thinks that the night is great and wishes it would go on forever. Finally the three toast to 'the possible'.

It's fall in Chapter 25 and Ellie's room is freezing because her mother tries to save money by keeping the heat off until the house temperature is below 65 degrees. The temperature doesn't bother Ellie because she's excited about what will come next now that they have the T. melvinus. Melvin wants to set up a lab, refine the compound, and then announce his discovery to the world.

Ellie starts to believe that he really could win the Nobel Prize and wonders what she should wear to the ceremony if he does. She decides to try and find out what Marie Curie had worn. Her research shows that she had frizzy hair like her, but she doesn't find out what she wore. Instead she finds out that her discovery had killed her.

At school, it's lunchtime and crispy corn day. Brianna comes up behind Ellie and starts talking to her. Ellie is happy to realize that she doesn't feel the pain she used to feel when she saw Brianna and when Brianna says that she used to like crispy corn dogs, Ellie only says that she did, too. Then Brianna asks Ellie if she thinks that Melvin would like her. She thinks he's cute. Ellie says no.

Melvin turns the heat up in Chapter 26. When he confesses that he is the one who did it, Melissa tells him why she keeps it down. He throws \$20 on the table and tells her to turn up the heat. Melvin and Melissa have another disagreement after she goes on a date with Ben. Before they go, he wants to know when they will be returning. Melissa says that she's too old for a curfew, but Melvin says he has the right to know as Ellie's babysitter. The couple returns ten minutes late due to a car accident. Melvin chides Ben for not leaving earlier to plan for such a thing. Then he chides Melissa for kissing Ben in the car. They argue about who is the adult in the house. It ends when Melvin walks out of the room, like a teenager.



When an Egyptian exhibition comes to San Francisco, Raj invites Ellie to go with him. Melvin stays home to work on his patent application. Ellie sees one sarcophagus that is surrounded by the dead man's furniture, food and supplies. It reminds Ellie of her grandfather's apartment. Finally they see the main exhibit. It disturbs Ellie. She thinks about her grandmother whose ashes had been put in the Bay. Raj explains that the Egyptians didn't bury or cremate people because they thought that the spirit would come back into a preserved body. He compares it to what Melvin is doing. He says he is preserving himself.

In Chapter 27, Ellie begins to think that maybe Melvin shouldn't release his findings because it could cause a negative outcome like some other discoveries had done. She remembers Mr. Ham's words about letting a genie out of a bottle and shares her fears with Melvin. Plus she wants to grow up and there needs to be adults. Melvin doesn't agree. Melissa arrives with Chinese food, but Melvin leaves the room saying that he's not hungry.

In Chapter 28, Ellie and Melvin aren't as close as they used to be. During this period, Melissa's play opens. Ellie helps her get people to attend the play on opening night. She gives tickets to Momo and Momo asks if Ellie would like to do something afterwards.

The play opens and Momo is there with her entire family. Ellie enjoys it this time and can relate to a line the character of Emily says about whether people understand life when they are living it. She looks at Melvin and he looks back, making her think that maybe he gets it, but then he looks away.

The play gets good reviews, but the atmosphere is so cold between Ellie and Melvin that Melvin won't even take the package of ponytail holders Ellie leaves as a peace offering. Then one day, after the play has ended, Melvin tells Ellie that the toilet is clogged again and that he gets what Ellie is saying. He won't release his findings. He's flushed it down the toilet.

Nicole comes back as Ellie's babysitter in Chapter 29 and Melvin leaves because he feels it's time to move on. He plans to travel around the country on a bus like Ellie's grandmother had always wanted to do. Ellie gives him her collection of ponytail holders as a going away present. She tells him she loves him and he says he believes in her. She realizes that he was her fourteenth goldfish.

After he leaves, the household is different. Ellie gives her room a makeover with her father's help. She and Raj look at colleges with Raj's brother, she starts hanging out with Momo, and Melissa and Ben get married.

One day, Nicole is babysitting because Ben and Melissa are looking for a house with a bigger yard so that Ellie can get a dog. They call to say they will be late. Nicole orders a pizza. Ellie is working on an Egyptian themed puzzle that Raj gave her. The doorbell rings and the postman delivers a jellyfish from Billy that's even stranger than the previous one.



Analysis

As the book comes to a close, characters overcome their challenges.

Melvin finally gets the T. melvinus and celebrates, as Melissa had wanted to do when she casted her play. But he has to be reminded that he did not achieve his goal alone. He had the help of a team. Raj isn't the only person who gets Melvin thinking. Ellie helps him reconsider his priorities. Thinking about the mummies, her grandmother, the atomic bomb, Marie Curie's death, and the experiences she's had growing up, she realizes that Melvin's discovery could be like letting a genie out of a bottle. Once it's unleashed there would be no going back and the consequences could be harmful. Ellie gets him to see that, too.

He also realizes that this time around, he can do things with his life that he didn't do before, like travel across the country on a bus, instead of simply comparing things like the movies and Raisinets to how they were when he was a kid the first time around. Maybe there is room for both fun and work. And he realizes that plays do impact lives, for it was the character of Emily's line that resonated with him, as well as Ellie. He even admits that he was wrong about *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Learning that drama has worth isn't the only stereotype that Melvin overcomes. He learns to be more open minded and to not judge people by how they look. Raj turns out to be his ally, not a punk kid.

Like Melvin, Nicole found out that doing what she thought she wanted to do wasn't the best thing after all. So she goes back to her babysitting job. This is fine though, because at least she tried to do what she thought she wanted to do. Now she doesn't feel stuck.

Melissa overcomes her challenges as well. She marries Ben and they look for a new house -- a new beginning. By dealing with her father as a child and her as an adult and successfully putting on a play that everyone thought was a bore, Melissa has gained the approval that she may have only received when her mother was alive. Melvin's leaving shows that he thinks that she can run her life and support Ellie in her passion.

Ellie has overcome the challenge of surviving middle school. She has gotten over the loss of Brianna as her friend. The pain is gone and she knows that she is going to be okay because now she has new friends. She has also discovered her passion and is ready to move on with it. She's even thinking of college as she goes with Raj when his brother goes to look at schools. And she understands her mother's passion now. Previously, she had agreed with Melvin, thinking that *Our Town* was boring. But this time she both enjoyed and learned from it.

In the end, everything is the same but different. Nicole is back babysitting. Ellie is working on a puzzle. Melissa is going to be late. They are going to get a pizza. Everything is just as it was when Melvin first arrived. But now there is a difference. The characters are no longer stuck. They are moving in the flow of the cycle of life.



Discussion Question 1

How has Melvin changed since the beginning of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What is Momo's role in Ellie's life?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ellie call her mother's marriage a new beginning?

Vocabulary

exotic, meter, scathing, impromptu, black-tie, refine, curfew, Renaissance, sarcophagus, cremated, preserving, imploringly, fate, enlists, transfixed, encore, unfathomable, consequences, purpose, conference, threshold



Characters

Ellie

Ellie is the story's narrator and main character. When the story opens she is 11 years old and hates change, yet she's in a traditional period in her life. She has just finished elementary school and is now entering middle school. Elementary school was comfortable to her. Everyone knew everyone else. But middle school is a new place with new people. And, she can't even go through this time with the support of her best friend, Brianna, because she has found her passion and it doesn't include Ellie.

Finding her own passion is problematic for Ellie. Her parents want her to find it and would like it to be drama, like it is for them, but she knows that it's not for her. When her grandfather, Melvin, appears as a teenager things change for her, though. Ellie discovers that she has an aptitude for science and that she has all along. She just needed someone like him to unleash it. She also learns a lesson about life that she was supposed to have learned a long time ago from having a goldfish. Her mother had interfered with the lesson though by making her believe that her goldfish had lived for 7 years. Ellie had actually had 13 goldfish, so she calls Melvin her fourteenth goldfish.

On the road to finding her passion, Ellie also gets over the fact that Brianna has moved on in a different direction, and Ellie makes friends with people she had first written off as being unlikely friends for her (Raj and Momo). She also starts to understand her mother's profession and appreciates it. In the end, she gets unstuck, values the cycle of life and moves forward in life.

Melvin

Melvin is Ellie's grandfather and Melissa's father. He hates what old age does to the body so he uses his lab facilities to perform research trying to find the fountain of youth. He finally does and ends up turning his body into that of a 13-year-old boy. His mind, however, is still that of a 76 year old. His main goal in the novel is to retrieve his research so that he can publish his findings and win a Nobel Prize.

But since, he is now seen as a 13-year-old, he can't get into his lab. Devising a way to get in forces him to team up with the unlikely character of Raj who he comes to realize is smart, but still thinks that he may know criminal types who can help him break into the lab. Ellie also helps him.

In addition, because he was picked up by the police for trespassing, he has to live with Melissa and Ellie. Living with Melissa is difficult for him because he is a child, but he treats her like a child in her own house, a place in which she is physically the only adult. He doesn't approve of anything she does and always criticizes her. Finally she reminds him that he's the kid now, not her.



Even though Melvin seems to be all about science, he did love his deceased wife who was the bond between him and Melissa.

By the end of the book, with Ellie's help, he reevaluates his priorities and decides that releasing his findings would not be the best thing for mankind, respects Melissa's profession and parenting abilities more, and decides to live the life he missed out on before with Ellie's deceased grandmother because he was too busy working.

Melissa

Melissa is Ellie's mother and Melvin's daughter. She's a drama teacher who doesn't like science at all until Ellie gives her a new perspective. In the beginning of the novel she is stuck, not moving forward. But by the end, she's able to move forward and marry her long-time boyfriend, Ben, and look for a new house which represents a new beginning.

During the course of the novel she must bring up two children, Ellie and Melvin, as well as deal with Melvin on the level of father and daughter.

Brianna

Brianna used to be Ellie's best friend, but her commitment turned to volleyball between elementary and middle school. Her lack of commitment to their friendship hurts Ellie at first, but as she, herself, starts moving forwards, she gets over it.

Raj

At first, Raj is the goth kid at Ellie's middle school. Later he becomes one of her best friends. He also help Melvin get the T. mavins out of the lab. Raj likes ancient Egyptian objects and knows a lot about mummies.

Mr. Ham

Mr. Ham is Ellie's science teacher. His words about the consequences of the atomic bomb makes Ellie wonder if Melvin's discovery is really for the good of mankind.

Ben

Ben is Melissa's boyfriend. He has asked her to marry him twice and she has refused twice. However, he is willing to wait for her forever. He has a PhD from MIT and works at a start-up game development company. Ellie likes him because he doesn't try to be her Dad. Melvin does not approve of his use of his PhD and Melissa loves him. He and Ellie's father are on friendly terms.



Jeremy

Jeremy is Ellie's father. Even though he is no longer married to her mother, Melissa, the two have a good relationship. Their relationship is so good that he comes over to fix the clogged toilet and he cooks for and eats with Ellie, Melissa and Melvin. Because their marriage did not work out, Melissa is afraid to marry her new boyfriend, Ben.

Like Melissa, Jeremy's passion is drama and he's an actor who has just gotten a big break, so he is not in town much. Both he and Melissa encourage Ellie to find her passion and they both hope it will involve drama.

Melvin has never approved of Jeremy.

Jeremy and Ben get along with each other and both attend Ellie's elementary school graduation and have dinner with Melissa and Ellie afterwards.

Momo

Momo and Ellie attended different elementary schools. They are both now at the same middle school and Momo is Ellie's lab partner. Ellie keeps her distance from her at first because she tries to rekindle her friendship with Brianna. Momo extends herself by offering to share her science book with Ellie. She also supports Ellie's mother's play by attending with her whole family. By the end of the book, Ellie is spending a lot of time with her and is happy to have a female friend again.

Nicole

At the beginning of the novel, Nicole is Ellie's babysitter. She contributes to Ellie's uneasiness about moving on from elementary school to middle school by quitting without any notice to take a job in the mall. Ellie looks after her when she leaves but sees Melvin instead. This is a sign that Ellie does not need Nicole at this point in her life.

By the end of the novel, Ellie has learned from Melvin and Nicole comes back, voluntarily, as Ellie's babysitter. Her job at the mall was not as great as she had thought it would be. but she tried and that's what counts. Also, now that she knows what other jobs are like, she no longer feels stuck as she did before.

Ellie's Deceased Grandmother

Ellie's grandmother has already died by the time the novel starts, but Ellie learns about mortality (part of the cycle of life) through how Melissa and Melvin treat her memory. Her memory serves as a bonding force between Melissa and Melvin who only get along in the presence of her memory. At the end of the novel, Melvin moves forward by taking the bus trip she had always wanted to take with him.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Jellyfish

The jellyfish represents new beginnings and the possible. Melvin reverses his age due to the compound he's able to generate from the jellyfish. This leads to him ultimately spurring new beginnings for Ellie and Melissa and opening his mind to the point that he takes a bus to travel not knowing where he is going.

Eating the jellyfish at the restaurant with Raj and Melvin enforces the friendship between Ellie and Raj once she starts playing the crispy corn dog game with him (replacing the corn dog with the jellyfish).

Finally, the delivery of the jellyfish on the last page of the novel does not mark the novel's end. It is a beginning.

The Goldfish

Ellie receives a goldfish from her teacher at the beginning of the novel to teach her about the cycle of life. In the end she truly learns about the cycle of life from Melvin who she calls her fourteenth goldfish.

The Toilet in Ellie's House

The toilet is a symbol of being stuck. It is always getting clogged but it is not the only stagnate object in the house. Ellie and Melissa are also stuck at the beginning of the novel.

Middle School

Middle school symbolizes change, transition, and growth. The comfort zone built in elementary school no longer exists. Students meet new people and find passions that may separate them from their old friends.

The Crispy Corn Dog

The crispy corn dog symbolizes Ellie's and Brianna's friendship. Ellie realizes that Brianna is no longer committed to their friendship when she doesn't take the corn dog Ellie offers her. Later in the novel when Brianna approaches Ellie in the lunch line, it is crispy corn dog day. Brianna says that she used to love them and Ellie simply says that she did, too. Her response and the lack of pain she feels when she sees Brianna makes Ellie happy. She realizes that she has moved on and that she will be okay.



Handprints

The handprints painted on Ellie's bedroom walls symbolize Ellie's past life which includes her friendship with Brianna. At the beginning of the novel, she laments that she and Brianna didn't paint handprints during the summer between elementary school and middle school. However she even realizes that she is outgrowing them and by the end of the novel she and her father give her room a makeover, replacing the handprints with a deep sea blue color and a jellyfish near the ceiling.

Ponytail Holders

For Ellie, ponytail holders symbolize friendship. She and Brianna used to pool their money to buy them and then shared them with each other. That was, until Brianna cut her hair so short that she no longer needed them. When this happened, Ellie found a new friend to share them with -- Melvin.

The ponytail holders were such a strong symbol of friendship that when Melvin keeps his distance from Ellie because she believes that he should not unleash his discovery, she leaves a new packet of ponytail holders out for him as a peace offering. He rejects them knowing that by doing so he's sending the message that he's still mad at her. And, when he leaves, she gives him her collection of ponytail holders as a going away present to remind him of their friendship and show him how much she loves him.

Meals

Meals symbolize people coming together with the goal of achieving the harmony one finds in a community. In this novel readers experience the harmonious relationship between Ellie and her divorced parents when Ellie's father comes to the house to fix the toilet and stays for dinner. More harmony exists at Ellie's elementary school graduation dinner when Ellie celebrates with her mother's boyfriend and her father (her mother's ex-husband). When Ellie and her mother eat together, they sit next to each other and Ellie and Nicole like eating pizza, a warm, comfortable, friendship meal.

The only time conflict appears in meals involving the family is when Melvin is present. When he eats with Ellie and Melissa, he sits at the head of the counter as if he were a king. When he eats with Ellie and her parents, he disrupts the evening by getting sick. He complains when they go to the Mexican restaurant with Ben. And the only take out meal he'll eat is Chinese. Everyone complies with his choice even if they want something else. The family's compliance shows his status as the respected family elder. His tendency to always eat the same thing shows a penchant for sticking with the expected instead of experiencing the drama of trying something new. This quality feeds Melissa's perception of scientist -- that they are boring.

The only meal that Melissa, Ellie, and Melvin truly enjoy together is when Melvin uses Melissa's mother's recipe to prepare coq au vin. That's because Melissa's mother,



Melvin's deceased wife, is the one who connects Melissa and Melvin. She is the bond and her spirit is there during that meal, connecting her family once again.

Melvin does meld with those of a like mind in the lunch court at school. He, Raj, and Ellie sit and eat together and their relationship with each other blossoms there.

Readers see the opposite happening when Ellie first meets Momo. There is a free seat next to her in the lunch court, but Ellie chooses to try to revive her friendship with Brianna by eating with her instead. This attempt turns out to be in vein when Brianna shows her commitment to volleyball over their friendship by refusing the corn dog Ellie offers her.

Raj later takes Ellie's offer of food as friendship when he chimes in and plays the jellyfish version of the crispy corn dog game.

Slippers

Just as Ellie's ponytail holders are a symbol of friendship, slippers are a symbol of home and love for Melvin. Ellie's grandmother used to like walking around the house in them and Melvin used to buy her a new pair every year for an anniversary present. He misses seeing her walking around in them and has a pair in his apartment that seem to be waiting for her to return. After he leaves, he sends Ellie different slippers with various designs.

The Halloween Dance

The Halloween dance symbolizes another transition in Ellie's life. It is a transition to the world of being an adolescent as she is now too old to go trick-or-treating. She also transitions from her years of coordinating costumes with Brianna -- another step in her growth. And at the dance she blossoms. She overcomes her fear of being onstage and just bops to the flow. This experience gives her the feeling of the possibility of something that she wants to be a part of.



Settings

Ellie's House

The toilet in Ellie's house constantly gets clogged, but it is not the only thing that gets stuck in the household. Ellie and her mother are also stuck. Ellie's room is decorated with handprints that she and her best friend, Brianna, had started painting in first grade. On the surface they would seem to be representing the notion of moving on as they show her physical growth. But even though she is growing physically, Ellie does not like change in the beginning of the novel. She misses elementary school, her friend, her father, and even her goldfish. She is also stuck trying to find her passion. Everyone else around her seems to have done so, but she still doesn't know what it is when readers first meet her.

Melissa is stuck in her relationship with her boyfriend, Ben, who has asked her to marry him twice. She's refused twice because she fears making another mistake. Instead she lives in limbo relying on her ex-husband, who himself has moved on, to come and unclog the toilet when he is in town.

Even the babysitter, Nicole, feels stuck in the house and moves on to what she thinks will be a better opportunity, working in a store in the mall.

Later, when Ellie and Melissa finally become unstuck (Ellie gets new friends and finds her passion and Melissa feels comfortable in her role at work, as a mother, and agrees to marry Ben), they plan to move into a new house.

Ellie's Middle School

A lot of the novel takes place at Ellie's middle school. This setting is important because it represents several things. First of all, it is an institutional place children must go to because of their age. When they enter, they leave their old comfortable life and mix with people they don't know. Momo, Raj, and the girls who pretend to be twins, but aren't, are examples of the new people Ellie meets.

But Brianna is there as well as the new friends she makes and the fact that the two worlds coexist, Ellie's best friend for forever who is drifting away and her new acquaintances who later become her friends, plus Melvin, makes this setting significant as a conduit of change. Readers see Ellie's transition taking place in the lunch court which is a natural place for Brianna, Momo, Melvin, and Raj to be in the same place at the same time as they all don't have the same classes. The lunch court itself is special because it is outside, in nature. This fact is significant because change is inherent in the cycle of life (one of the novel's themes) and Ellie and Melvin experience change in this setting. Melvin learns to accept Raj and Ellie makes new friends and learns to embrace change.



The classroom serves as a setting for Ellie's blossoming relationship with Momo. At first Ellie is standoffish. Momo is her new science lab partner but she went to a different elementary school. When Ellie goes into the lunch court at the beginning of the year, she sees an empty seat next to Momo, but chooses to sit next to Brianna. Towards the end of the novel, She and Momo are hanging out together and Ellie says that she's happy to spend time with another girl again.

Melvin's Apartment

The visit to Melvin's apartment is significant because it gives readers as well as Ellie and Melissa a better understanding of Melvin. He is not someone who only thinks about science. He's a man who has loved and still loves his deceased wife enough to keep her memory alive by keeping out-of-style furniture she had picked out, her slippers ready for her and taking the time to dust and maintain the clean appearance of her dresser, the way she would have liked it, while his is a mess.

Melissa loved her mother. She had cried when she died, kept her recipes and looked at them sometimes just to see her mother's handwriting, and had bonded with her father when he had cooked her mother's recipe just as her mother would have and when they drove by the house she grew up in. Seeing the signs in the apartment of how much he loved her mother shows that scientist can be romantic.

The Lab

The lab's main significance as a setting is that it represents an obstacle that Melvin must overcome in order to achieve his goal of retrieving the T. melvinus. In an effort to do so, he has to use creativity and work with a team.

The lab also provides the setting in which Ellie learns that it is okay to try and fail. The key is to pick yourself up and try again.

This setting also provides the backdrop for Melvin to show his stereotypical view toward Raj and his brother. Getting the T. melvinus means breaking into the lab. Melvin assumes that Raj and his brother know how to do such a thing. It would be hard to justify breaking into any other building, but breaking into the lab is justifiable because Melvin is trying to get what is his. Thus, the lab is a safe way to show Melvin's stereotypical view.

The French Restaurant

Melvin and Melissa both realize that Ellie's decision to go to a French restaurant for her birthday dinner, as opposed to the burrito restaurant, is significant. Eating there signifies that she's embracing change. Her decision brings her closer to the memory of her grandmother and her grandfather. It is also there that she receives a gift associated with her passion, a microscope. This gift overshadows the cell phone that she had

expressed a wish for earlier in the novel. Noticing her reaction is another piece of the puzzle for Melissa, helping her see that Ellie's passion really is science.



Themes and Motifs

The Cycle of Life

The book starts with Ellie telling the readers that her preschool teacher gave her students a symbol of the cycle of life -- a goldfish. Since a goldfish has a very short lifespan, she thought that having a goldfish would be a good way for students to see the cyclical nature of life -- birth , life, maybe reproduction and death.

Ellie, however, never sees her goldfish (or any goldfish) go through this cycle because her mother thwarts the lesson by replacing the original goldfish when it dies and each one she buys afterwards for the next seven years. Ellie only learns the truth when she finds what she thought was her original goldfish (but was really the thirteenth one) dead.

As it turns out, messing with the cycle of life runs in the family. Melvin does the same thing when he turns himself into a teenager. He hates what old age does to the body. He shrank as he aged. Aging caused him to loose his hair. He has to get up at multiple times during the night to go to the bathroom. Old people have to live in nursing homes or assisted-living facilities and their friends, people they love, die due to heart attacks, strokes, and cancer. Old age is so intolerable for Melvin that he'd rather die.

By observing Melvin and his interactions with people and events , Ellie finally gets her lesson about the cycle of life. Because of this, Melvin is her fourteenth goldfish.

While Melvin thinks he's doing the world a favor by giving people the ability to become teenagers again, Ellie realizes that going through the cycle of life and dealing with the changes it brings is life itself. She likes the fact that she feels as if she can hear her grandmother, whose ashes were scattered in the San Francisco Bay, in the rolling waves and the calls of the seagulls. In contrast she finds it creepy that the mummies tried to preserve themselves and their lives while waiting for their souls to come back to their bodies instead of being cremated or buried when they died. Their frozen-in-time belongings make her think of Melvin's apartment and she immediately gets Raj's point when he compares the Egyptian's act of preserving themselves to what Melvin is doing to himself.

Unlike her grandfather, Ellie understands that the impact of his discovery is not as simple as just making people younger. It is interfering with the cycle of life and such an interference would have consequences. She wonders if people's handprints would get smaller. Would they start putting less candles on their birthday cakes? Most importantly, who would make the decisions that adults learn to make like when to take out the trash and how high to keep the thermostat?

Maybe, as the character of Emily says in the play *Our Town*, the thing that makes life precious is the existence of the cycle of life. Life doesn't last forever and even if you



could repeat phases over and over again, would it be as fun as it was the first time? Would Ellie be able to repeat the feeling she had had the Halloween dance or the celebration after they retrieved the T. melvinus? Even Melvin complains that things are not as good the second time around. The movies aren't as good, the Raisinets aren't as good, and there are no caramel apples at the Halloween party.

The cycle of life also involves movement and change. Ellie has a problem with change at the beginning of the novel. She misses the comfort of her elementary school, her friend Brianna, her babysitter and her goldfish. But she learns to appreciate her new experiences, friends (Raj, Melvin, and Momo), and her newly discovered passion for science. She wants to go through the cycle of life so that she can experience all that life has to offer. Observing her mother's stalled relationship with Ben, Melvin's frozen-in-time apartment and the mummies shows her the consequences of being stuck in time and not letting the cycle of life take its course. Melissa doesn't find true happiness until she finally marries Ben. Melvin starts living when he lets go of his apartment and starts traveling.

The end of the book comes full circle with Nicole babysitting Ellie and ordering pizza again and the toilet being clogged. But life for Melissa and Ellie is moving on. Melissa has married Ben and the two are looking for a new house with a toilet that doesn't get stuck (thus also moving on from the reliance of Ellie's father who is also moving on as a working actor) and a yard big enough for Ellie to have a dog. Ellie realizes all that she has learned about the cycle of life through Melvin and she, herself, calls him her fourteenth goldfish.

Love and Family Relations

The novel uses two periods of time to depict this theme. The relationship between Ellie, her mother, her father, and Ben represents a modern family. Ellie's parents are divorced, but are still friends. Their relationship is so amicable that her father has no problem stopping by to fix the clogged toilet when needed, her mother and her father can have dinner together with Ellie and Melvin and her mother can express happiness for Ellie's father's success. In addition, her mother, father, and Ben (her mother's boyfriend) can all attend Ellie's elementary school graduation and have dinner together afterwards. The two men even openly express agreement with each other about the challenges of middle school.

In addition, both parents participate in Ellie's life. Ellie's mother and father encourage her to find her passion and follow it. Her father calls her even when he's on the road. And both parents are there for important school events like her graduation.

For his part, Ben realizes that his role is not to replace Ellie's father. She already has one and loves him. His job is to be Ben and he does a good job at doing that.

This modern family configuration sends the message that a child from a "broken home" can feel love and shows how it can be done. It also shows a family hierarchy in which



elders receive love because they know how to relate with each other to achieve harmony and a loving atmosphere instead of expecting it because of their roles in the family.

A more traditional relationship exists between Ellie's mother, Melvin, and Ellie before Melvin turns into a teenager. Even though everyone thinks that Melvin is a grouch and he and Melissa fight a lot, they respect him because he is the head of the family. This respect continues in his teenage form. Melissa shows Melvin the respect a child traditionally shows their parent. The seating arrangement is different when they eat once Melvin appears. Before, Ellie and her mother sat next to each other. Now, Melvin takes the role of a king, sitting at the head of the counter. Nicole, the babysitter calls Ellie's mother Lissa. But Melvin calls her by her given name, Melissa, and she never asks him to call her by her nickname. Melvin says things that she doesn't like or agree with, but she holds her tongue because he is her father. And even though the two have disagreements, Melvin eats a lot, and takes up space in the house, Lissa shows concern when Melvin says he's leaving and she makes sure he can still keep in contact in the family. She also arranges the storage of the furniture in his apartment.

There is love in this traditional relationship, but it displays itself in the manner that was normal at the time -- with the father taking a more authoritative role and the mother taking the role of the nurturer. That person was Ellie's deceased grandmother and, until Ellie discovers her love for science, she is the only person who connects Melvin and Melissa. Her recipes connect them and so do the memories of her when they go by the old house.

Ellie doesn't really see Melvin often or relate to him as his older self. He plays the role of grandfather and has her respect because that is what he is. As his younger self, he still has Ellie's respect because she knows that he's her grandfather, but now that they have a more equal relationship due to his age, she can help him, and now that he's living in their house, she is able to relate to him on a different level and realize that she loves and respects him because of him, as a person and not as person playing a role. He has moved from the traditional view of family relationships to the more modern one. Lissa even feels the shift in noticing the relationship between Melvin and Ellie.

This shift due to age makes one realize that maybe young people should revere their elders more and elders should revere young people more. Both have a lot to offer each other.

Overcoming Challenges

The characters in this novel face various challenges. Melvin has to get the T. Melvinus out of the lab. He also needs to adapt to his new age. Lissa faces the challenge of dealing with her father, putting on a successful production, raising a daughter as a single parent and getting on with her life. Ellie faces the challenges of middle school, changing friendships, and finding her passion. Each character overcomes their challenges through perseverance and as they do so, a healing process takes place.



Melvin doesn't give up in his attempt to get the T. melvinus. Getting arrested and knowing that it could happen again and that his efforts could get Ellie, Raj, and Raj's brother in trouble doesn't stop him. In attempting to help him and failing the first time, Ellie learns a valuable lesson. It is okay to try something and fail. The point is that one tries and doesn't give up if they want to accomplish something.

In the end, Melvin's perseverance pays off and he reaches his goal. But throughout his life, Melvin has had only one focus -- science. And the only thing that grounded him was his relationship with his deceased wife. Memories of her are all over his apartment. He even has kept her slippers as if waiting for her to come back to him. As he deals with the challenge of living as a teenager he faces growing pains and learns to see life in a different way. The wound that opened when his wife died begins to heal and he embraces things in his life outside of science.

The fear of making repeating mistakes and her father's disapproval and criticism cause Lissa's pain. Ellie knows that the fear of making another mistake is behind Lissa's refusal to marry Ben. Melvin does not approve of her profession. He uses sarcasm when he says the word "theater". He criticizes her choice of the play to put on. He also makes negative comments about how she dresses, her behavior in dates, and her choice of men. During the course of the novel, however, Lissa is able to recover from the wounds he imposes. When he cooks using her mother's recipe and she sees how much of her mother's belongings he has kept, she realizes that they share a bond. The success of her play gives her confidence. And Ellie's explanation of what makes science interesting helps her understand her father. Plus, now that he is a teenager, she's able to deal with him on a different level. While she still shows him respect, she stands up to him when the issues are within her realm of being an adult. By the end of the novel, she has healed and is able to finally accept Ben's marriage proposal.

Ellie uses the word "pain" to describe the challenge of seeing Brianna and no longer being close to her. She feels a stab of pain when she sees Brianna fooling around with the volleyball and her friends. Later, after she has made new friends and discovered her passion, she no longer feels a stab of pain when she sees Brianna. Instead she feels the signs of healing -- a small ache similar to what someone with a scraped knee would feel when there's no more swelling.

Like Melvin and Lissa, Ellie perseveres through the trauma associated with growing older, changing environments, and losing friends. She emerges as a healthy person, one who is able to share and help others. She helps Melvin adjust to his life as a teenager and realize the dark side of his discovery. She also helps Mr. Ham plan a science class relating monster movies to science thus making science relevant to students.

Friendship

The novel explores the theme of friendship through Ellie's changing relationship with Brianna, who had been her best friend since forever. That was, until the start of middle



school. Before then, they had painted handprints on Ellie's wall, something they started doing in first grade. Each Halloween they had coordinated their costumes. And they had an inside joke that involved a game centered around corn dogs.

Things, changed, however during the summer between elementary school and middle school. That summer, Brianna discovered that volleyball was her passion and since it was a passion Ellie didn't share, they spent most of the summer apart. Brianna was so busy with practice that she hadn't had time to paint handprints with Ellie. When Ellie finally sees Brianna at the beginning of the school year, she is surprised to see that Brianna has cut her hair. Before that time, they had worn similar hairstyles and had pooled their money to buy hair accessories that they could share. Now though, Brianna's hair was in a style that would never work for Ellie's frizzy hair. It makes her think that she doesn't know this Brianna. She says that the style looks good on Brianna, but she no longer looks like herself.

Ellie still tries to keep her friendship with Brianna alive. She sits with Brianna and members of her volleyball team. She plays the corn dog game with her. She invites her to her house. But even though they talk it becomes more and more obvious to Ellie that Brianna has shifted her commitment from their friendship to volleyball. It's understandable that Brianna can't go to Ellie's house if she has a prior commitment, but Brianna could suggest a time when she is free and can come to Ellie's house, but she doesn't. The ultimate sign of the end of their friendship occurs when Ellie offers her a corn dog as an offering to show that they are still friends and Brianna refuses it. She chooses volleyball over her friendship with Ellie.

If Ellie had her way, there would be a law of friendship which would declare that if you've been friends with someone for about forever, you can't just stop "and change directions without the other person." But even though Ellie feels as if she is being left behind, the reader sees the alignment of forces that will help Ellie move on, if she lets them. Almost every time the sight of Brianna tempts Ellie to join her, Melvin intervenes by calling her over to talk with him. She meets Raj and Momo who she discovers share her interests. And Melvin comes into her life as a person she can relate to. These new friendships allow Ellie to grow. Without him she would have still been surrounded by people who didn't share her passion and might still be wondering what her passion was.

These events raise the question as to whether external events come between friends for a reason and once they do, instead of trying to keep things the way they had been, should each person accept that there is something else out there for them -- something else that they can't obtain or share with the other person? The overlapping of Brianna's shifting commitment and the entrance of the teenage Melvin, Raj, and Momo implies that this is the case for Ellie.

Stereotypes

A stereotype can be an offensive generalization that's used to characterize a group of people or an over-exaggerated view of a group of people. Both types of views of groups



of people appear in this novel and through the eyes of the people with the stereotypical views and reality, the theme of how stereotypes can not only cause false views but can also place limits on the stereotype holder emerges.

Melvin holds several stereotypical views. One such view is his take on the arts. He thinks that Melissa has wasted her time studying drama, doesn't take her job seriously, and criticizes the choices she makes in doing her job. He displays his dislike for drama almost as soon as he enters the house. When Ellie wonders if magic is behind the reduction in Melvin's physical age, he scoffs and asks if Melissa is teaching Ellie to believe in magic. His tone alone shows his disdain for magic. Then he adds that that's what happens when one majors in drama. Ellie says that he says the word "drama" as if it were a bad word. Later when Melissa comes home excited about casting the leads for the play *Our Town*. Melvin insults it by calling it a snooze. He thinks his lab is more important than Melissa having a place to store her props which he shows by his willingness to push her prop boxes aside to set up his lab. He even blames Melissa's inability to cook on her focus on theater instead of science. This time he pronounces the word "theater" in a way that shows that he thinks it has no value. In his mind, reading books like *The Catcher in the Rye* is a waste of time. He tells Ellie that he's sure that Newton hadn't wasted his time on such drivel.

Raj and his brother also fall into one of Melvin's stereotypical groups. He assumes that the two of them know how to break into buildings because they aren't white anglo saxon protestants. Raj's goth dress doesn't help matters any. Melvin judges people by their looks so when Raj explains that his style is a form of self expression, he says that he'll be sure to tell Harvard because by then he has realized that Raj is intelligent and he and his brother aren't thugs. Raj has a curfew while Melvin takes Ellie out to help him break into a building. He criticizes Melissa's clothes, but wears them to school. And he's the one who gets the strange looks.

Melissa is just as guilty as Melvin when it comes to professional stereotypes. She thinks science is boring and that there's no romance in science. When Ellie recognizes the bacteria on the billboard, Melissa accuses Melvin of brainwashing Ellie. Her words echo Melvin's earlier words about Melissa brainwashing Ellie. Ellie, however, helps her see science in a different light. In the end she accepts Ellie's view and realizes there is passion and romance in science.

Melvin also learns that the arts can teach and provide useful life lessons. He admits that *The Catcher in the Rye* is a good book and listens to Emily's words about life in *Our Town* with interest because he can relate to them. and he, himself has a flair for the dramatic in the way he dresses and behaves as Ellie notes when he gets out of detention. He also sees that Melissa is good at what she does when the play receives good reviews.

Both Melvin and Melissa learn that their stereotypical views are just that, stereotypes. Freeing themselves from these views help them lead a richer life and both are able to move on.



Ethics

A lot of decisions people make involve ethics and readers see evidence of this in the decisions Melvin and Ellie make.

In Melvin's case, there's the question of the ethics of working on your own project using your employer's facilities or maybe even being on your employer's time clock. Is it right to be doing this? Are you really stealing from your employer when you do? You might not be taking anything physically, but what about the electricity, wear and tear of instruments, and time in terms of productivity if you should be doing another job, but are working on your own project instead?

Considering these aspects, was it ethical for Melvin to use his employer's resources to work on his own project? And then, is it right for him to try to keep all of the credit when he could not have made his discovery without their resources? And what about when others help you in any way? Melvin doesn't want to give Billy any credit even though he found the jellyfish. And he tries to shut out Raj and Ellie even though he would not have retrieved his work without them. Raj calls him on this point and he gives in.

What about the ethics of the investors? Is it right for them to take all of the credit for what people who work for them do, get rich off them, and leave the people with nothing? Or, do workers sign away their rights when they agree to work for a company? What is the responsibility of a corporation to its employees? Do they owe them anything other than their salary?

Is it okay to break into a place to get something that is yours, and in Melvin's case was it really his, or is it still just breaking and entering?

An even bigger question raised in the novel is what is the ethical responsibility of scientist to mankind. Should something be done just because it can be done or should scientist remember Salk's words that the greatest responsibility of scientist is to be good ancestors. There have been a lot of helpful scientific findings, like pasteurization, but the ability to build and possess of atomic bombs still threatens societies.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrator is 11-year-old Ellie who is going through a transformation in her life as she enters middle school and tries to find her passion all while helping her 76-year-old grandfather who has discovered a formula that has turned him into a 13-year-old boy.

The point of view works well with the plot and themes as it lures readers in as they feel Ellie's experiences of joy, pain, and wonder. It's both intelligent and funny at the same time and seeing Ellie learn to embrace change and move forward through the eyes of a child will help other children who are trying to overcome the same challenge.

While reading, it's important to remember that Ellie is just 11. Therefore, her perceptions are of someone of that age and some things she says may not always be reliable.

Language and Meaning

As the narrator is an 11-year-old child, the vocabulary used in the novel tends to be simplistic. Exceptions occur, however, when people talk about their passions. Then the language becomes dotted with jargon from the field in question. Melvin uses scientific expressions when he speaks about science. Melissa uses theater expressions. Vocabulary related to ancient Egypt appears when Raj talks about the subject to Ellie and the two visit the mummy exhibition.

As a middle grade novel that works well with the common core curriculum, the field and subject related language works as a teaching tool. In addition, such language adds realism to the novel as when people talk about their passions they often forget that those not involved may not use the same language. Ellie often makes Melvin explain what he's talking about, so readers do not get lost in scientific terms.

Structure

The novel is divided into 29 short chapters and is interspersed with Ellie's thoughts and dialogue that moves in a linear fashion. The short chapters make the novel a quick read and could be beneficial these days for children with short attention spans. The chapter titles almost provide a summary of each chapter, similar to a textbook. The storyline introduces all of the main characters in the first few chapters which is easy to do as the cast of characters is small. Still, for a short novel the author manages to say a lot.



Quotes

Middle school is like one of those highway restrooms in the middle of nowhere. It's dirty and smelly, and it's crowded with strange people.

-- Ellie (chapter 6 paragraph 8)

Importance: Ellie dislikes change and misses the comfortable elementary school womb. This quote shows her first impression of middle school -- a place of transition.

Average people just give up at the obstacles we face everyday. Scientist fail again and again. Sometimes for our whole lives. But we don't give up because we want to solve the puzzle.

-- Melvin (chapter 8 paragraph 34)

Importance: This quote marks an 'ah ha' moment for Ellie. She likes puzzles, so she begins to see the link between science and herself. And the idea that scientist believe in the possible makes everything click. This is when she decides to help her grandfather retrieve the T. melvinus.

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed. A few people cried. Most people were silent."

-- A quote from Robert Oppenheimer (chapter 10 paragraph 7)

Importance: This quote supports the element of the unknown when it comes to scientific findings. Such findings could improve life or they could unleash negative reactions that poison life. At first Ellie relates to the words in light of people living with things, like cell phones, that they had never dreamed of, or at least thought only existed in science fiction movies. Later she remembers these words and thinks of the negative outcomes associated with the atomic bomb. This adds to her feeling that it would be best for Melvin to keep his findings from the general public.

Maybe that part of me -- the science part -- was there all along, like seeds of an apple. I just needed someone to water it, help it grow. Someone like my grandfather.

-- Ellie (chapter 16 paragraph 13)

Importance: Since the beginning of the novel, readers have known that Ellie has been trying to figure out what her passion is. There have been hints, like the fact that she likes puzzles and cooking, but she did not make the connection to science until now. The realization marks a victory for Ellie, because until this point she had been a bit lost surrounded by others who had found their passion.

We were two objects in motion, hurtling through space, and then an external force -- middle school, volleyball, life -- hit us?

-- Ellie (chapter 17 paragraph 18)

Importance: This quote expresses how Ellie tries to put the end of her friendship with



Brianna in perspective. She had been friends with Brianna since forever and she takes Brianna's new commitment to volleyball, at the expense of their friendship, hard.

I love puzzles. I like trying to figure out how things fit together.
-- Ellie (chapter 2 paragraph 6)

Importance: This quote is placed near Ellie explaining that her parents encourage her to find her passion for a reason. The reason is the fact that Ellie likes puzzles, and knows why she likes them, shows that the seeds of her passion for science are already there. Her parents can't water them, though, because their passion is the arts. It's not surprising, however, that Melvin helps her discover that science is her passion.

What I do remember is a feeling : people shouting less and laughing more when she was around.
-- Ellie (chapter 16 paragraph 21)

Importance: While the Egyptians waited for the dead's spirit to come back into their physical body and Melvin is waiting to unleash the way for people to return to their youth, readers experience the strength of the memories of those who have moved on in accordance with the cycle of life. Ellie's grandmother has died but her spirit is strong enough to still unite Melvin and Melissa. When they talk about her they laugh together and there is indeed less shouting. And in the end, Melvin gets on a bus to see the country, just as she had always wanted to do. This is the natural path in the cycle of life.

But maybe life's also precious because it doesn't last forever. Like an amusement park ride. The roller coaster is exciting the first time. But would it be fun if you did it again and again?
-- Ellie Paraphrasing the Character of Emily in Out Town (chapter 28 paragraph 19)

Importance: This quote supports what Ellie was trying to tell Melvin about the dangers of releasing his discovery. Ellie catches Melvin's eye during the delivery of this line and hopes he gets the message.

We gave Goldie Thirteen a toilet bowl funeral and I asked my mom if we could get a dog.
-- Ellie (chapter 1 paragraph 14)

Importance: Ellie doesn't like change and she doesn't share her mother's passion for drama. So when she finds out that so many goldfish had died, she asks her mother for something stable and drama free, a dog.

He was my fourteenth goldfish.
-- Ellie (chapter 29 paragraph 23)

Importance: This quote sums up the fact that Melvin taught Ellie the things about life that she was supposed to have learned from her goldfish.



It's a happy beginning.

-- Ellie (chapter 29 paragraph 34)

Importance: This quote demonstrates how much Ellie has changed since the beginning of the novel. She no longer misses things that have ended like her friendship with Brianna and elementary school. Now she embraces possibility and accepts that the cycle of life means that people move on and are always experiencing new beginnings.

Scientist fail all the time. You tried. That's what counts. You have to keep at it.

-- Melvin (chapter 11 paragraph 44)

Importance: These words give Ellie confidence to observe, wonder why something is as as it is, and look for answers. They also gives her the confidence to try new things. like dancing in public at the Halloween party.