

Girl Walking Backwards Study Guide

Girl Walking Backwards by Bett Williams

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Plot Summary

In *Girl Walking Backwards*, a teenager named Skye must deal with a variety of problems, from a New Age addict mother, to a schizophrenic friend, to her own sexuality. The book begins with Skye applying for community service positions; she wants to work at a runaway shelter but the man running it thinks she has problems herself, so she ends up working for Planned Parenthood. There, she must give peer education talks, and reveals that she is not heterosexual. Skye has a complicated family history, with divorced parents. Her mother has become an active member of a New Age group called Matrix, and found out that Skye is gay through Skye's "boyfriend's" mother. Skye's mother Anna tries various means to "cleanse" Skye, from astrology to rebirth. Skye also has problems at school, as she struggles to find a topic for her English paper, eventually choosing to work on Virginia Woolf. Though she is a talented student, Skye will not be allowed to go to college unless she goes through a cleanse approved by her mother.

One day, Skye meets an intriguing girl called Jessica at a cafe, and they go shopping and find a dead bird together. On the other hand, Skye also has some friends from the volleyball team, including a clean-cut girl called Lorri. She continues to see Riley and is bothered by her mother, who thinks that a friend of the family molested Skye when she was younger, under the influence of drugs. The more Skye thinks about it, the more she comes to believe this, though it most likely never happened.

As Jessica and Skye become closer, Skye realizes that Jessica is a "cutter" and self-mutilates, as well as probably having other mental problems. The two girls go to a rave together and kiss, but Skye is horrified when she sees Jessica and Riley having sex in the bathroom. Jessica's friend Mol takes them home and prevents more trouble. At the same time, Skye's mother is also troubled, overdosing on pills and still trying to convert Skye. Later, Jessica comes over to apologize, and ends up talking about her own history of abuse, from her brother, to Skye, and then masturbating with Skye's vibrator. When Skye goes by Riley's house later, however, she discovers that he is mad at her, and that their relationship has effectively ended. Afterwards, Skye calls Jessica only to find that Jessica is in a psychiatric institution.

Skye goes to visit her father, and hangs out with his friends. However, she discusses the family friend with him, and her father is certain that she was not molested. When Skye goes back home, she finds out that Jessica has been transferred to another institution, farther away. Skye finds Mol and the two girls track Jessica's online personality, finding out that Skye's sexuality did not play a role in her breakdown. Back at home, Anna finds the dead bird and freaks out, and Skye briefly runs away; when she returns, she discovers that her mother is in a psychiatric hospital, as well. Going to the library, Skye finds Lorri, and the two girls bond. First, they bury the bird, then they go to Lorri's house, and eventually begin a relationship. The book ends with Skye deciding to help her mother, and on the verge of her relationship with Lorri.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Girl Walking Backwards, the story of a bisexual girl coming of age in late 1990s California, opens with the protagonist, Skye, describing her fantasy of rescuing a runaway girl. She is not naive, however, and knows that her fantasies probably have little to do with the reality of actual runaways. Nevertheless, when she sees that she can do community service instead of going to study hall, she jumps at the chance and goes to a nearby shelter for teens. When she's there, though, she lies about her age on the form, and the man who is interviewing her wonders if she, herself, needs help. Scared for various reasons she's not sure of, Skye jumps up and runs away from the shelter. Instead of volunteering there, then, she decides to work for Planned Parenthood, though she has to go through a lot of red tape to get the experience approved by the school. The man who runs the outreach program, Dan, is a little creepy and holds training sessions at his apartment, where he goes into detail about anatomy and other sexual topics with Skye and the two other trainees. After completing the training, Skye must present to a health class at her school as a peer educator. There, Dan asks her to share what kind of birth control she uses, and she reveals that she is gay.

In Chapter 2, Skye's mother Anna comes into the story. Skye tells the anecdote of how her parents met, on the beach, and how painful their divorce has been for her mother. Afterward, her mother had gotten involved with a group called Matrix, a New Age group that has a variety of methods for dealing with pain, and had moved away from Los Angeles after some disastrous jobs. Skye strongly disapproves of the group, but tries to stay quiet. In this chapter, Riley also appears. Riley is Skye's unofficial boyfriend; they mutually masturbate together and talk about girls. However, it is Riley's mother Heather who reveals to Anna that Skye is gay, a fact that Anna has not dealt with well, freaking out and worried about Skye's "energy field."

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first two chapters of *Girl Walking Backwards* form the foundation for all of the major plot lines of the book, as well as establishing the strong personality of the protagonist, Skye. As an opening, Skye's discussion of her fantasies of rescuing runaways is at once touching and disturbing. Importantly, though, she is self-aware enough to realize that reality does not align well with these fantasies, and that she is likely to be rebuffed when actually trying to rescue people. This idea of rescue, and what is possible, plays an important role later on, both in terms of Skye's relationship with her mother and with Jessica.

Sexuality as a theme also appears quite early on, with Skye's work for Planned Parenthood. The main item of note here is that it introduces the reader to her bisexuality, as well as demonstrating her firm statement, and lack of shame, about it, as



she presents this fact to a group of her peers. The section does not shy away from confronting the issues she does have with her sexuality, however, as both Riley and Anna challenge it in different ways.

Finally, Skye's voice is established from the first page as confrontational yet vulnerable, a duality that pervades the rest of the book.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3 opens in Skye's GATE English class, the class for gifted and talented students. A college-level course, the class is very competitive. Skye has one friend in the class, a boy she thinks is a genius, called Sam. After school, Skye goes to play volleyball. She is a not very gifted member of the team, but is friendly with a girl called Lorri, whom she finds sexy in an athletic and unassuming kind of way. On the way home from practice, however, Skye sees a girl at the bus stop, and follows her into a cafe, where the girl, Jessica, meets two friends. Skye can only manage a few words to her, but finds her waif-like and very appealing. Back at home, Anna has brought an astrologer friend, Paul, to see Skye. Skye unwillingly submits to the reading, and finds herself crying during it. Later, she and her mother get into a fight, when her mother says that she cannot go to college for English or architecture, Skye's current top choices, unless she does a spiritual cleanse (implying that this cleanse will make her not gay).

In Chapter 4, Skye goes over to Riley's house, where they play sexually and sleep. Skye realizes that they are outgrowing their relationship, but is still unwilling to give it up. Later, she goes back to the cafe where she saw Jessica, and sees her again. She and Jessica get into a real conversation, and Jessica offers to take her to the Salvation Army shop where she saw some boots. On the way, they find a dead bird they name Heda, and decide to freeze her before burying her; Skye takes her home. Back at the cafe, alone now, Skye runs into Lorri and her friends, who are going kayaking. They invite Skye, who has a wonderful time, and flirts slightly with Lorri.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Chapters 3 and 4 are most important in their introduction of two new characters: Lorri and Jessica. In many ways, these two girls, both of whom end up linked romantically to Skye, serve as foils for one another. Lorri is brave and straightforward, Jessica elusive and darker. These characteristics are reinforced by the settings in which Skye meets the girls, respectively the volleyball court and the cafe. Jessica comes off as the more important of the two in this section, and the dead bird Heda can in some ways be read as a symbol for her and her relationship with Skye: doomed before it even gets off the ground, destined never to fly. At this point, however, all the reader knows is the alignment of Jessica with some of Skye's earlier fantasies - both about saving somebody and about the physicality of a female lover.

Note that Anna's efforts to "cleanse" Skye begin to amplify in this section, and even these early efforts are distressing to Skye. Anna's threat about colleges also foreshadows the escalation of tension between the two women.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

In Chapter 5, Skye considers college again, and tries to make up her mind about what she wants. When she goes down for breakfast the next morning, her mother is distraught, and tells her that an old hippie friend of the family, Robert, has been arrested for child molestation. Anna is convinced that Robert must have molested Skye, as well, when she was young, because the whole group was on drugs so much that she's not sure she would have noticed. This thought stays with Skye as she goes over to Riley's house. They fool around, both thinking about girls. When they are finished, Skye tells Riley about Robert, but he tells her that she would definitely remember something like that if it had actually happened.

Chapter 6 begins in the locker room before a game, where Skye confesses to Lorri that her mother's been strange lately. However, she doesn't want to upset her friend too much before the game. Skye plays extremely badly. Later, she comes across Jessica on the front lawn, who is excited to see her. A strange boy comes up to them and talks in "Satanist" curses. Though Jessica tells Skye to ignore him, Skye can't help feeling that he really cursed her, and has to take some time to cleanse herself. Jessica invites Skye back to her house, which is very normal and suburban. However, in Jessica's room, Jessica claims she can see bats. Looking at Jessica's arms, Skye realizes that she cuts herself. The two girls then attempt to sum up the "stories of their lives" for one another.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

The unorthodox use of child molestation, and child exposure to drugs, as a potentially positive thing, defines these chapters. The horrors of child molestation are not denied by either Anna or Skye; however, they do provide excuses for both women that make their lives easier or more acceptable in certain ways. For Anna, the idea of Skye being molested as a child gives her a reason, and thus a possible solution, for Skye's sexuality. Skye, on the other hand, may have found the perfect person to save in herself. Skye obviously wants to share this information with others, but Riley dismisses it, and she decides it is not the right time to tell Lorri. Seeing Jessica's literal, physical trauma later might temper some of Skye's willingness to believe that she herself was molested.

Readers should also take note that Jessica's mental illness becomes more distinct in this section from simple eccentricity, as she hallucinates the bats. Skye does not worry too much about this, caught up in her own worries.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Skye comes home in Chapter 7 to find her mother almost overdosed on prescription pills. She's not sure what she took, but works to put her to bed. As she does so, she has a fantasy about being informed by a police officer that her mother is dead. Skye briefly chats with her father, but doesn't talk about the seriousness of her mother's condition. Later, Skye discovers that her mother has been drinking a six-pack of beer each night along with her anti-depressants. When Anna wakes in the morning, she doesn't remember anything, and they don't talk about the incident. Skye sees that Anna has left her a variety of New Age pamphlets, which she throws away, an act for which she is later reprimanded. While thinking about the subject for her English term paper, Skye fantasizes about Virginia Woolf, and what it would have been like to save her.

Chapter 8 begins with Skye's fantasies of Jessica. Riley is waiting for her to go to a party, but Skye goes with Jessica to the rave instead. Beforehand, she meets her mother, and is pleased to think she makes a good impression. Jessica's two friends are over as well, including Mol, who is a sexually explicit pagan. The girls chat lewdly in an online chat room, then go to the dance. There, Jessica kisses Skye, who does not know what to make of it, and realizes that Lorri is watching from across the room. Skye then finds Riley and tells him about Jessica, but later finds Riley and Jessica, who have never met and who are extremely high, having sex in the bathroom. Skye freaks out. Mol takes control of the situation, and takes them both back to Jessica's house. In the car, Jessica is cutting herself, and threatening to kill herself.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Anna's storyline escalates in this section, heading towards its climax. On the other hand, Jessica's storyline reaches its violent and dramatic climax here. Anna, who has obviously been in need of help for some time, pushes herself over the edge with her drinking and mixing pills in this section. Her problems are both inner and outer in their causes and effects. She is deeply disturbed by her relationship with Skye, but also by her divorce and her inability to move on. These problems are made more complex by her outer actions, and especially her substance abuse.

Similarly, Jessica's problems (and consequently, Skye's) are a blend of both inner and outer demons. For Jessica, this section demonstrates her inner problems manifesting in an external way. Skye is hurt, as anyone would be, by Jessica's actions, but nevertheless goes with Mol to take Jessica home, perhaps still hoping that she might save her friend. The kiss, followed by the betrayal, mark both the high and the low point in Skye's relationship with Jessica.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

In Chapter 9, Skye leaves Jessica's house in the morning, before either of the other girls wakes up. She ponders whether or not she can ever really know someone. She also thinks about her and her mother's house, which she loves, and how much work she personally has done to make it so beautiful. When she arrives home, her mother is not there, but Skye finds a pamphlet left for her about surviving ritual abuse. With the possibility of childhood abuse in mind, Skye imagines re-telling her life to Jessica.

Skye resolves not to call Riley or Jessica in Chapter 10, but Jessica later calls to apologize and says she is coming over. However, she does not arrive until three hours later. Then, she reveals that she has a brother who is in jail. Jessica falls asleep, and the girls go to bed. Jessica wakes up and wants to talk about Riley, but Skye refuses. Jessica says she knows that Skye is gay, and Skye says that she thinks she was sexually abused by a man on acid when she was a child. Jessica says that she was too, and uses Skye's vibrator in front of her.

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Chapters 9 and 10 appear to provide some kind of catharsis for Skye, though they do not resolve any of the problems presented in the earlier chapters. Anna is absent for a time, which provides Skye with relief from her problems. Meanwhile, Jessica seems genuinely contrite about her actions, and Skye is still in love with her. Therefore, Jessica's manipulative use of her vibrator in front of Skye brings them back together. Skye's claim of child abuse, matched by Jessica's, represents another way in which Skye is trying to reach out and both save and be saved by Jessica.



Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary

Anna returns in Chapter 11, to find Jessica there. However, Anna is very nice to Jessica, surprising Skye. Jessica leaves, and Skye goes for a walk; she loves to look at certain houses in their neighborhood, and has devised a walk around them. When she gets home, however, Skye is told by her mother that she has to go to a Cross-the-Line Workshop, which is painful and Skye does not want to go. At the same time, Skye receives an acceptance letter from an all-girls' school, Mills College, that has an excellent program in architecture. This disturbs Anna a great deal.

Back at school in Chapter 12, Skye runs into Lorri, who tells her that she was in a car accident the night of the rave. Skye then has to go to English, where they study propaganda, and disagrees strongly with the teacher and his definition and examples of it. Later, she goes over to Riley's house to find that Riley's mad at her; however, they make up, more or less, and he shows her his porn collection. She knows then that their relationship is over. At home, she calls Jessica, only to get a cold response from Jessica's mother: apparently, Jessica is in the hospital. Skye goes to the hospital in the hopes of setting her friend free, but they won't let her in.

Chapters 11-12 Analysis

Though several recurrent elements and characters make their appearance in these chapters, the most important elements are Skye's break with Riley and Jessica's hospitalization. Skye's break with Riley (or his break with her) demonstrates that they are moving forward, and that Skye is moving more towards her true self, who does not want to have sex with Riley. The recurrence of other characters, and especially Lorri, from earlier, reinforce their coming importance in the narrative.

Jessica's hospitalization is important, not only because it affirms Jessica's true mental illness, but also because it demonstrates that Skye still fosters illusions about saving her friend - when, of course, Jessica's best chance for "salvation" or healing is to stay in the hospital itself.



Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 Summary

Skye goes to see her father in Los Angeles, which upsets Anna. On the way to drop Skye off, her mother says that she's decided to become a Matrix trainer. However, the fee for this is so high that she's decided to sell the house, which is very upsetting to Skye, because she loves their home. At her father's house, Skye smokes pot with her father and his friends, but her father gets very upset when a friend of his brings out coke. She sleeps in her room with several of her father's female friends in bed with her. In the morning, she sees her dad in the kitchen, and asks him if he thinks anything happened between her and Robert when she was a child. He is positive that nothing did. He leaves for work, and Skye goes for a walk around the neighborhood. She sees a house she loves and breaks in. It is so full of beautiful things, she takes an old Pepsi bottle that captures the light for Jessica. However, when she returns home, she finds that Jessica's been transferred to another facility.

Skye's mother is not at home, and Skye goes to the cafe. She finds Mol there, who tells her that her kiss with Jessica was just normal. They are worried about Jessica, and go into her online chat room, where Skye reads all of Jessica's messages to make sure that she wasn't the tipping point for Jessica's breakdown. There, "Jester," who is Jessica, only mentions Skye in passing, but says much darker things about her brother abusing her, and harming herself. Skye then meets Mol's mom, Amelia, who's nice to her. Mol takes Skye to a party that evening, dressing her as a goth, and a girl holding a "seance" tells Skye that her mother is possessed by a demon. Mol kisses Skye, as a friend, and then Skye, who has had too much to drink, throws up.

Chapters 13-14 Analysis

Chapter 13 works to establish two things: first of all, that Skye was not sexually abused as a child, as she appeared to want to believe earlier. Moreover, readers may have been questioning why Skye stays with her disturbed mother rather than with her father throughout the book. While legal custody battles may come into it (they are alluded to early on), the absence of her father, even during her visit, proves that living in Los Angeles with him might be an equally dangerous environment, though in a different way.

Chapter 14 reinforces Skye's willingness to take all of the blame for people's problems onto herself, as she worries that she and her sexuality led to Jessica's hospitalization. Mol, through the chatroom, helps to prove that this isn't the case, and Mol is equally protective when Skye reacts so badly to being told her mother is possessed by a demon. As Mol later points out, she is Skye's first real friend, someone with no romantic agenda who simply wants to help her.



Chapters 15-16

Chapters 15-16 Summary

In Chapter 15, Skye wakes up with Mol at the party, and then walks home. There, she finds that Anna's found Heda, the dead bird, in the freezer, and is irrationally upset. Skye goes to hide in the library, only to find that she's gotten her period as she reads a book of Walt Whitman's poetry. She then goes to St. Jude's seminary nearby, where she hides in the bathroom. She wants to cut herself, but can't make herself do it, though she does think of both Jessica and Anna as she stays there.

Skye's literature paper is due in Chapter 16, but her teacher won't accept her excuses. In addition, he tells her that her idea, about Virginia Woolf's madness in her writing, is not all right, since she cannot use the biography. However, he feels badly for her, so he tells her that if she turns in a text-based paper of three pages, he'll give her a C. Meanwhile, Anna has not come home, and the house smells of vomit. Heda is still out, in a drawer. Skye finally gets a message from her father that Anna is in a psychiatric institution, and that he can't come up for five days, but they have to fool the authorities in the meantime. Skye goes to visit her mother, who weakly apologizes.

Chapters 15-16 Analysis

Chapter 15 fulfills one of Skye's earlier wishes, of saving a homeless girl; only in this case, it is herself. At first, she feels like she has no home due to her mother's histrionic behavior; then, she literally has no (legal) home, as her mother goes into the hospital. Note that Jessica and Anna have both been hospitalized in the same ward, though Jessica's problems are so serious that she has been transferred by this time.

The English paper, which has been looming for most of the book, also coincides with Skye's desire to save hurt girls from themselves. Though Virginia Woolf is dead, Skye fantasizes about rescuing her from her madness and perhaps her own childhood molestation - seemingly unconnected from the problems of her own life until she finally makes an overt reference to Jessica and her mother in connection with the author.



Chapters 17-19

Chapters 17-19 Summary

Not sure of where to go, Skye considers what homeless people do, and goes to the library. There, she runs into Lorri, who tells her that she saw Skye and Jessica's kiss. In Chapter 18, the two girls go on a hike together, and on the way there, Skye tells Lorri everything. They decide to bury Heda, who is still in Skye's bag. They hike, and then fall asleep, cuddling, by Hedda's grave. Later, Lorri takes Skye to her house and they have a picnic by the pool, dozing together. Skye decides to help her mother, no matter how awful she's been. Finally, Skye and Lorri make out.

Making a date for that evening in Chapter 19, Lorri drops Skye at the cafe, where she runs into Mol. She tells Mol, and wonders if she's jealous; but Mol says, no, she's just her first friend. Mol reveals that Jessica's been diagnosed as schizophrenic, and the two girls go to the ward where Anna still is. There, on a little altar her mother has created, Skye leaves the stolen Pepsi bottle.

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

With Jessica and Anna both taken care of by medical authorities, the novel must now resolve Skye's own problems. It does so in the form of the strong Lorri, who helps Skye bury Heda (which can also be read as Skye's relationship with Jessica) and begins a romantic relationship with Skye. At the end of the story, Skye finally has friends, in the form of Mol and the receptionist at the hospital, and a sane girlfriend: Lorri. Though nothing is perfect, the major issues have been resolved, and Skye can finally move forward.



Characters

Skye

A teenager nearing the end of high school, Skye is protective, fierce, and yet vulnerable in important ways. The most important concept of the book, the idea of being able to save somebody, is of utmost importance to Skye herself, who tries to save and protect those around her, especially Anna and Jessica, even when their problems are so deep that they go beyond what Skye could possibly do for them. Skye even fantasizes about saving Virginia Woolf, showing the utter impossibility of her dreams. In the end, the only person who Skye can really save is herself. Once she starts doing this, with Lorri's help, she gets the strength to support her mother, despite their rocky past.

The idea of home is also particularly important to Skye. This may stem from the fact that she and her mother had to leave Los Angeles together, but also shows vulnerability on Skye's part. Skye adores their house in Santa Barbara, for example, and has done a lot of work on it herself. She loves to walk around and look at neighborhood houses; and she even sneaks into a stranger's house in Los Angeles. Ironically, at the end of the book, she is more comfortable with herself without a home than she ever was with one.

Jessica

A schizophrenic girl from Skye's school, Jessica's problems are not apparent at first, though Skye senses that she has a dark history. Jessica's activities, such as capturing the dead bird, taking Skye to buy beautiful old boots, and talking about traveling the world, seem delicate and vulnerable to Skye, appealing to her sense of the beautiful and needy. At the same time, Jessica quickly begins to show signs of mental illness: during Skye's first visit to Jessica's room, for example, Jessica talks about the bats flying around her ceiling when, of course, there are none. Jessica's true personality only becomes clear when Mol and Skye read her online chats, and see that she had been sexually abused by her older brother and his friends as a child, which she deals with in the present by cutting herself. This cutting can be read as a symbol of the interior made external, as both Jessica and Anna struggle with the differences between inside and outside (see "Themes," below). Jessica's mother finally gets her help, though this means that Skye and Mol are not allowed to see her any more as Jessica receives treatment. Her vulnerability in fact masked deeper issues beyond the capacity of other teenage girls to solve.

Anna

Skye's mother, Anna, feels that she has been mistreated by the world and is owed something. After a painful divorce from Skye's father, she embezzled money from a company in Los Angeles. Though they did not prosecute her, she felt it better that she and Skye move away. Now, trying to heal herself with a New Age group called Matrix,



Anna believes in their power to help her (and Skye) more than anything else. She even threatens to sell their home in order to become a Matrix trainer herself, though this is prevented by her mental breakdown. The novel does not treat Matrix with the same reverence that Anna does. After everything, including a variety of workshops and trainings, Anna still has problems that she has not let go of. These are manifest both in her continued need for antidepressants, as well as her penchant for mixing these pills with heavy drinking. Skye has to save her one evening from a potential overdose, though neither of the women talk about it later, and this is not the kind of "salvation" Skye had in mind. Despite her New Age leanings, Anna is firmly against Skye's homosexuality/bisexuality, and is convinced that if Skye were cleansed, she would become heterosexual. This is the main point of tension between the two, though others also crop up at various points. Finally, Anna's collapse reveals her true vulnerability to Skye, and allows Skye to accept her mother for who she is.

Mol

Mol is Jessica's, and later Skye's friend. She is an overweight pagan who eventually helps Skye to such an extent that she becomes Skye's "first friend."

Lorri

Lorri is a girl on Skye's volleyball team who later becomes Skye's girlfriend.

Riley

Skye's early "boyfriend," Riley is mostly a partner for mutual masturbation.

Skye's Dad (Robert)

Skye's father, Robert, who lives in Los Angeles, is notably absent from her life.

Don

Don is the Planned Parenthood trainer.

The Dean, Mrs. Stanley

The Dean and Mrs. Stanley are administrators at Skye's school.

Gabe and Tracey

Skye's fellow trainees for Planned Parenthood are Gabe and Tracey.



Heather

Heather is one of Jessica's friends.

Mr. Tenasky

Mr. Tenasky is Skye's English teacher.

Sam

Skye's one friend in her English class is Sam.

Tara and Nina

Tara and Nina are Lorri's friends from volleyball.

Robert

An old friend of Skye's family, Robert has been convicted for child molestation.

Paul

Paul is the astrologer Anna brings to see Skye.

Joanna

Joanna is the receptionist at the psychiatric hospital.



Objects/Places

High School

Skye, Jessica, and Lorri attend the same high school.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is Skye's hometown and her father still lives there.

Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara is the place to which Skye and her mother moved after the divorce, and still live.

Skye's House

Skye put a lot of work into her house personally and it is one of her favorite places.

Jessica's House

Jessica's house is a surprisingly normal, suburban house.

Chat Room

The Chat Room is the cyber-room where Jessica revealed her deepest secrets.

Hospital

Both Jessica and Anna go to the same hospital's psychiatric ward.

Party

The rave is the type of party where Jessica and Skye kiss, as well as where Jessica and Riley make out.

Homeless Shelter

Skye's first attempt at volunteering is at a homeless shelter.



Planned Parenthood

Skye's final job is at Planned Parenthood.

Volleyball

Volleyball is Skye's extra-curricular activity; she eventually quits, because she is bad at it. This is how she knows Lorri.

Matrix

Matrix is the New Age group Anna has joined.

Prozac

Anna takes the anti-depressant Prozac.

English Paper

Skye must write a college-level English paper for her honors class.

Virginia Woolf

Skye's chosen topic for her paper is Virginia Woolf.

Zuma's Electronic Cafe

Zuma's Electronic Cafe is where Skye meets Jessica, hangs out with Mol, and goes often.

Heda

Heda is the dead bird Jessica and Skye find.

Cross the Line

The painful workshop to which Anna takes Skye is called Cross the Line.



Themes

Body versus Mind

The theme of body versus mind appears in several guises in *Girl Walking Backwards*: sexuality, mental illness, and even basic appearances. In terms of sexuality, Skye's appearance does not coincide with what those around her consider to be "gay." Her mother often comments on her feminine appearance, as do participants in the Cross the Line workshop. Skye even has sexual experiences with a boy, which would seem to contradict her belief that she is not heterosexual. Nevertheless, though Skye's exterior does not coincide with traditional images of lesbians or bisexual women, she does identify herself this way, and her identity remains strong throughout the book, even growing as she ends her relationship with Riley.

Mental illness, embodied by Jessica and Anna in different ways, also shows the difference between interior and exterior. Though on the surface, these women appear in control, with Jessica a popular, pretty girl at school, and Anna mastering the ways of *Matrix*, they are falling apart inside. This can be seen in a variety of ways, but most notably when Jessica sleeps with Riley: she would not want to hurt her friend (mind) but nevertheless sleeps with her boyfriend (body). Jessica's struggle with these two concepts is also evident in her cutting, where she literally brings the interior of her body into the external world. It is due to this that her mother finally seeks help for her.

Growing Up

Growing up, in terms of *Girl Walking Backwards*, seems to mean developing your own identity in spite of what goes on around you. Skye is the perfect example of this, since she has so little parental supervision. Her father's contribution to her upbringing (he does not pay child support and does not even come immediately when Anna is hospitalized) is next to nothing, while Anna can barely look after herself, let alone a growing teenage daughter. It is perhaps for this reason that Skye fosters fantasies of salvation for others, when really she wants to be saved, herself. Throughout the novel, though, she grows stronger through her experiences, and develops a web of friendships and relationships (with Mol and with Lorri) in which the girls are on equal levels - not a rescuing kind of relationship, but more of relationships between equals. At the end of the book, Skye has taken control of her own life and grown up to such an extent that she can even forgive her mother, and look after her to a certain degree; not the kind of rescue she once imagined, but not the wished-for death she mentioned earlier in the book, either. Finally, Skye is free to make her own decisions, having grown up.

Sexuality

Girl Walking Backwards presents very firm views of sexuality, although not in any traditional sense. The first shock of the book comes at the Planned Parenthood



presentation, where Skye describes herself as "non-heterosexual." From there, she uses other various terms, but seems to settle on "bisexual," though even there she tells her mother that she is only "probably bisexual." This nebulous description of sexuality is reinforced by Skye's actions. Her encounters with Riley are not traditional sex, though they are certainly sexual, and confusing enough to Riley's mother that she feels the need to tell Anna that Skye is gay, further confusing the situation. Skye's sexual relationship with Jessica is almost the reverse of her relationship with Riley, as she only watches Jessica use a vibrator, and receives only one kiss from Jessica. Therefore, it makes sense in terms of the novel that Jessica and Riley, counterparts in Skye's romantic life, end up having sex. Later, Skye is able to establish a much healthier romantic relationship with Lorri, in which they do not use labels such as "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual" at all. In fact, the book privileges romantic experiences over their labels, and implies that it is these labels, rather than their implications, that cause trouble in the first place.

Style

Point of View

Girl Walking Backwards is told in the first person, from the point of view of the protagonist, Skye. It is a close first person view, and Skye's strong voice colors the reader's experience of the events. Her vulnerability is balanced by her intelligence, making her a more reliable narrator than might be expected in a book about a teenage girl: Skye admits when she is confused, or doesn't have the answers, and is very clear when she does. The result of this first person narration is an intimate experience of the events of the book, which is needed because of their sometimes violent and sexual nature, which could be hard to understand from an outside perspective. This point of view also highlights Skye's loneliness: especially towards the end of the book, she is not sure where to go and often feels trapped by herself, which may explain why she so wishes to save someone. Finally, the close first-person narration allows the reader to experience the confusion of Anna and Jessica's behaviors, as their mental illness leads them to various inexplicable words and actions.

Setting

The book is set in the mid-1990s, in California. This is important because of the different cultures (and countercultures) present in the book. First of all, the remaining New Age movements, popular in the 1970s, are still prevalent in this setting: hence, Anna's involvement with Matrix. Nevertheless, these groups are described as holdovers. The people with whom Skye comes into contact at school and at various parties embody other forms of counterculture, such as paganism, satanism, wicca, and other groups that the author is careful to distinguish. The proliferation of such groups, as well as her mother's belief, makes Skye vulnerable to messages from members of the groups, such as the astrologer or the girl at the party who tells her that Anna is possessed by a demon. These groups are in stark contrast to Lorri, the "every girl" of the book, who shows a more traditional Californian lifestyle for this era. At the same time, the book seems to show that, in this setting, anything can be normal, making it all the harder to forge your own identity.

Language and Meaning

The tone of the book, created by Skye's strong narrative voice, immediately grabs the reader. It is alternately aggressive and dismissive, vulnerable and tough, just as Skye herself is. Slang doesn't come into the narration or exposition very much (though some words, such as "sucks," do), but do appear in dialogue with other characters, and particularly when Jessica is chatting online with other characters in a now-archaic form. The juxtapositions found in Skye's language and meaning, are symbolic of her literally trying to develop her own voice, away from the confines of her mother's lifestyle, as she

tries to grow up and figure out who she is. In another way, the difference between the sometimes-vulnerable narration and Skye's often-tough dialogue also embody the theme of body versus mind, or outside versus inside, that the book shows in other areas.

Structure

The book is structured very traditionally, into nineteen relatively even chapters. Within each chapter, Skye usually discusses a mixture of events from various interwoven story lines, including those of her mother, Jessica, Lorri, Riley, and her English paper. The traditional structure of the book and even division of the chapters, in an era where more non-traditional methods of storytelling are equally acceptable, may also signal Skye's longing for a kind of normality, or a format on which to base her life in a non-traditional society where she is struggling to find her role.

Quotes

"That's why they're romantic. They're there and then they're gone." (Chapter 1, p. 1)

"Culture is the only thing other than death that has the power to change you." (Chapter 4, p. 51)

"The moments before sleeping have always been my favorite time. I go between worlds." (Chapter 5, p. 59)

"Lorri was in her getting-psyched-for-the-game mode, deep insider herself like a real athlete, someone who could pay attention to things." (Chapter 6, p. 68)

"I drown. I'm always drowning." (Chapter 6, p. 73)

"It was May and lust came on me like a habit, an addictive condition." (Chapter 7, p. 91)

"My reflex was to get up and say hi but Jessica's body held me back." (Chapter 8, p. 104)

"I lost my faith then. Not like my faith was any big thing." (Chapter 9, p. 123)

"If sexual abuse makes people jerks then I was glad nothing happened to me." (Chapter 10, p. 132)

"Some tortured English writer with sunken eyes. Things floated and swam in and out of her open mouth as her ghost left her body and went into the world, into me. Just like Jessica. And Mom." (Chapter 15, p. 201)

"Going down in the elevator, her crying was still in my ears and on my skin." (Chapter 16, p. 209)

"A long time passed where I didn't think, just felt the loss of something." (Chapter 19, p. 241)



Topics for Discussion

Skye describes herself vaguely as "non-heterosexual" and probably bisexual. Given the events of the book, how would you characterize her sexuality? Why is it important that she describes it in this way?

Skye has two quasi-lesbian encounters in the book, with Jessica and with Lorri. Compare and contrast her relationship with the two girls.

Similarly, Skye must deal with mental illness in both Jessica and in her mother. Compare and contrast her experience, and particularly her reactions, to both cases.

Why does Skye go to see her father at the moment she does? What about his lifestyle might be appealing or unappealing to her?

Skye has several options for the future at the end of the book. In your opinion, what is she likely to do, based on her past actions? Use textual evidence to support your argument.

How do particular locations (the rave, the cafe, even the cities) contribute to the movement of the plot? Pick one location and describe its importance in terms of the novel's themes and symbols.

How might Heda be read as a symbol? Find three to four possible interpretations of this object.

Who is the girl walking backwards? What does it mean to be walking backwards, in terms of the book?