

Give a Boy a Gun Study Guide

Give a Boy a Gun by Todd Strasser

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Plot Summary

Give a Boy a Gun is a novel by author Todd Strasser. In this novel, Brendan Lawlor and Gary Searle are two boys that attend Middletown High School. Brendan Lawlor moves to Middletown from Springfield in the middle of his ninth grade year. While Brendan was a jock and popular in his previous school, his life changed when he came to a new town and a new school. Brendan becomes friends with Gary Searle, who is also an outcast at Middletown High School. Brendan finds himself struggling beside Gary with the other kids at school teasing them, making fun of them, and treating them as outcasts. As the boys continue through high school, the divide between them and the popular kids widens. For the next few years, Brendan and Gary continue to deal with the daily torments inflicted upon them by other kids at school, especially the athletes, such as the football players and the wrestlers. Give a Boy a Gun is a novel that questions who is to blame for the school shootings that plague the high schools across the country. Is the fault of the gun manufacturers, parents, kids, violent video games and movies or something else that is pushing kids to turn to killing their tormentors at school, and even turning the gun on themselves to stop the pain and the torment they felt their classmates were inflicting upon them.

One night, when the school dance is taking place, Gary and Brendan enter the gym with masks covering their faces, armed with bombs and guns. Gary and Brendan force all of the students and teachers to lay face down on the gym floor. While Gary and Brendan are yelling instructions at the students, they are also firing shot into the air. They separate the boys from the girls and then zip tie the hands of the boys behind their backs. The boys focus their torment on one particular athlete, Sam Flach, by shooting him on both of his knees. Brendan also shoots one of the teachers in the chest to prevent him from using his walkie-talkie to call in teachers as reinforcements or to call the police. The boys plan to torment their tormentors, kills everyone in the gym and them turn the guns on themselves to end their own lives and own pain.

Brendan and Gary's plans do not turn out quite as they thought. First, Allison, which is Gary's on and off again girlfriend, who is not supposed to be at the school dance ends up showing up because she has a bad feeling that Brendan and Gary are up to something. When Gary finds out that Allison is in the gym, Brendan and Gary start to argue about carrying out the plan. Since the plan is to kill everyone and then commit suicide, Gary hesitates because he has no intentions on killing Allison.

The police drop a mike and camera through the ceiling of the gym. While a professional negotiator tries to talk the boys out of carrying out their plan, the police also have the boys' parents try to talk them out of carrying out the plan. While the boys argue, Allison removes her belt from her pants and goes over to Sam Flach to try to stop the bleeding on one of his legs. When Allison goes to retrieve a belt from one of the other boys, she sees his hands are free from the ties. The same boy also has a pair of nail clippers to cut the ties off another one of the boys. Allison simply moves on to get a belt from another boy and applies the belt to Sam's other leg to stop the bleeding. At the same time that Allison is trying to save Sam's life, Gary shoots himself.



Simultaneously, the boy with his hands untied clips the ties off another boy and they tackle Brendan. One of the boys holds Brendan down, while the other boy frees the hands of the other boys. At least a half a dozen boys attack Brendan, kicking him repeatedly in the head—causing him to lapse into a coma and causing brain damage.

The entire novel is a recount of the stories of the survivors. Each person tells the stories that revealed the signs that Gary and Brendan presented as a warning that a school shooting or some kind of revenge on their schoolmates was a plan in progress. Others that were victims of the shooting question the causes that would send these boys into a shooting rampage. It is a question of gun control, home influences, student interactions, societal expectations, and other factors, and how all of these aspects affect the way that people, especially teenagers, react to stressful situations.

Introduction

Introduction Summary

Denise Shipley is the author of the novel introduction of the book. Denise is a sophomore in college when she hears of the school shooting at Middletown High School. She talks about how when she heard about the shooting, she went to Middletown to try to figure out what happened. She says she interviews people that want to talk about the school shooting. In fact, some are so eager to talk that they are even hunting her down to talk about it without her having to track them down. She says the stories that are in the following chapters come from the words of those she spoke with and interviewed. By the end of the shooting rampage, Gary Searle, one of the shooters, was dead from a bullet to the brain.

Introduction Analysis

While this book covers this particular school shooting, the goal of the book is to reveal what is happening in schools across America. The problems stem from many different directions rather than just one. Some of the shooting occur from school bullying. Others are because of teenagers that do not have a stable home or school life. Yet others are simple accidents of children bringing their parents guns to school, not realizing the consequences, and accidentally killing one or more of their classmates.

This story tells the story of a school shooting that is purposeful for the shooters. It foreshadows that the shooters went on a rampage because of bullying occurring at school. By the time the shooting is over, however, at least one of the shooters is dead.



About Gary

About Gary Summary

Ryan Clancy tells about the first time he met Gary. Gary and Gary's mom, Mrs. Searle moved next door to Ryan and his family. While the other boys play soccer with each other, while waiting for the bus, Ryan wasn't into that and neither was Gary. This helped the boys to form a bond. Ryan describes Mrs. Searle as being overprotective. He says it may be because she was a single parent and Gary was her only child.

Gary's fourth grade teacher describes him as a sweet and obedient child. She does recall that some of the children teased Gary about being overweight.

Allison Findley, who was Gary's on-and-off again girlfriend, met Gary in the fifth grade. Allison says Gary talked about how horrible his parents' divorce was. Gary would describe to Allison about how his dad would never come to see him or pay his child support.

Gary's mother, Cynthia Searle describes her divorce as horrible. She says that Gary got put in the middle a lot, which she didn't want to happen. She also says that she didn't know what else to do so that she did what she could to manage the arguing over money and other disputes during the divorce process. Gary's mom says she took Gary to a psychologist to try to figure out what was going on his head. She now realizes that nobody truly understood what Gary was thinking.

Gary's sixth grade teacher describes Gary as a very smart student. He says that Gary especially excelled in science and math. Gary even volunteered to create and help the teacher maintain the classroom website.

Ryan Clancy says that Gary was constantly on the computer—on the Internet. Ryan says he could tell that Gary was multi-tasking by the faraway sound of his voice when Ryan called him on the phone. One day, when Ryan was at Gary's house, he saw Gary toggling between three instant message screens and talking to Ryan at the same time. Ryan says that in hindsight there may have been clues that led to Gary shooting up his high school. He cites an example of how when they were kids, they would burn caterpillars in the sun with magnifying glasses to watch them squirm.

Another teacher says that Gary was so smart that it would take Gary 30 minutes to do homework that took other kids hours to complete. Gary's mom called to ask the teacher why he wasn't giving enough homework and the other parents were complaining he was giving too much.

Ruth Hollington says she still can't believe Gary was involved in holding the kids hostage and what they did to one of the football players. She says she doesn't really blame what happened on Gary, but rather on Brendan Lawlor.

About Gary Analysis

Everyone has a perspective and vantage point about a person or a situation. In the end, nobody truly knows what is going on in someone's mind except the person. All of the accounts of the person that Gary was show him as being one way on the outside, but possibly having an inner struggle with his self-esteem.

There is a foreshadowing that someone else may have had an influence on Gary, which caused him to be involved in the shooting, his friend Brendan Lawlor. Other people blame the rage that Gary took out on his classmates on his parents' divorce or the teasing he endured as a child. In retrospect, nobody may know why someone decides to take hostages and kill people - not even the ones that are committing the act.



Part of Brendan Lawlor's Suicide Note and About Brendan

Part of Brendan Lawlor's Suicide Note and About Brendan Summary

Brendan writes that he hopes his suicide note prints in big, bold letters in the newspaper so that people will know why he did what he did. He mentions that he will be dead by the time that people read his note.

Brett Betzig says he became friends with Brendan in second grade until about the middle of seventh grade. Brett describes Brendan as a popular kid. Brett also says that Brendan was a good athlete for his size. He also mentions that Brendan was somewhat of a bully, making fun of kids and joking around with them for various reasons, such as having body odor. Brett says that he and Brendan played on the same soccer team. Both of their fathers were the coaches for the team. Brett says Brendan would play on different sides of the spectrum with one day playing at his best and the next time playing as if he didn't care.

Brett also says that he and Brendan played video games together a lot. At first, they were both very into playing Need for Speed. Then Brendan received the demo version of Doom. When playing Doom, Brendan would become so transfixed by the game that even when his mother was talking to him, it was as if Brendan couldn't hear her or he would tell his mom to go away.

One of Brendan's middle school teachers describes Brendan as very bright. She says he exhibited some temperamental behavior, but she also says it's normal for boys that age. She didn't recognize anything unusual about Brendan. The neighbor says she was standing in her driveway one day when Brendan's mother returned from dropping him off at school. The neighbor says Brendan's mom looked very upset, so she asked if she was OK. Brendan's mom said that Brendan gave her a particularly hard time this morning and that sometimes Brendan would just blow up. The neighbor found this odd since both of Brendan's parents seem so even-tempered.

One of the Lawlor's neighbors describes Brendan's parents. She says they were good neighbors and they were good parents. The neighbor mentions they were always willing to help in the neighborhood and that she never heard Brendan's parents even yell at him.

The neighbor says that she got the feeling that the Lawlor's were private people. Minus the time Brendan's mom shared the one story with the neighbor, the neighbor never heard of any other negative matters. The neighbor mentions that it was hard on Brendan when he had to move and change schools—and it would be on any kid that age.



Julie Shore describes how terrible Brendan looked when he found out his family was moving out of Springfield. The move would mean that he would also have to change schools. Julie says he looked so terrible that it seemed as if someone had died.

Part of Brendan Lawlor's Suicide Note and About Brendan Analysis

Brendan says it is the parents' fault for the way that they raise their children. Brendan says the parents teach their children to treat people that are different from them as below them. Brendan explains that he felt that just because he didn't dress the way the other kids did, listen to the music they did and try out for sports that everyone looked at him as if he was a creep. This feeling is what led to the shooting and Brendan says it's not his fault, but the fault of the parents who raised their children to be judgmental and not accepting of others.

The stories that people are telling and some of the characteristics that Brendan presents are possible signs of violence, foreshadowing the school hostage and shooting situation. For example, the fact that Brendan seemed to be popular and a little bit of a bully in his school, but then is less known and the bullying he incurs in his new school.

Another sense of foreshadowing is the how transfixed Brendan was by violent video games. In addition, Brendan showed signs of violence to his mom with sudden outbursts of anger and her admittance that it was hard to control and manage Brendan at time.

While it is normal for families to keep family matters private, people also need outside help sometimes. The fact that the Lawlors seemed to keep everything quiet and to themselves is a sign that there may have been more wrong going on in the household than Mrs. Lawlor let on even to the neighbor.



Seventh Grade

Seventh Grade Summary

Brendan moved from Springfield to Middletown in the middle of the seventh grade. One of his neighbors is a boy his age, describes the first time he saw Brendan, Brendan was just standing in the front yard of his house staring at the neighbor boy, Dustin. Dustin says that Brendan didn't even say hi. Then later, when he see Brendan again, Brendan comes over juggling three tennis balls and strikes up a conversation with Dustin about if he likes this video game and that. Dustin describes it as odd.

Ryan Clancy describes Brendan as being very quiet and out of place in school. Ryan says that Brendan didn't talk or do much for the first few weeks he was at Middletown. Ryan describes it as if a rain forest dweller was in the middle of New York City, so Brendan felt totally out of his comfort zone.

Emily, one of Brendan's friends says she noticed him right away. Since Emily and Brendan were both new at the school, she said they had something in common that brought them together. Emily says that after not talking for the first three weeks he was in school, once Brendan did start talking, it was hard to shut him up. She said all he talked about was how big the school was and how much he missed his old school and friends. When Emily told him that's all he ever talks about, he never mentions it again.

One of Brendan's teachers notices that Brendan is in distress right away. She says, of course, this is normal for a seventh grader that comes to a new school in the middle of the school year. She said she pulled Brendan aside and talked with him about this and that he looked back at her with such surprise in his eyes.

Seventh Grade Analysis

The move from Springfield to Middle town marks the transformation from the old Brendan to the new Brendan. In this case, the transformation is not a good one. A once popular, athletic and outgoing child is now keeping everything bottled up and inside of him.

While there are some signs that Brendan is experiencing distress, the teacher scoffs it off as normal for Brendan's situation. While Brendan's behavior may have been normal at the time, when it goes untreated for extended periods, a little distress can make a person lose control, which is a foreshadowing of how Brendan lets of out his distress on others.

The one friend, Emily, that Brendan shares things with and opens up to even shuns him. This may come back to cause harm to Emily. It may also save Emily from Brendan when the shooting occurs because she is the one person who reached out to him in his first few weeks at a new school.



Eighth Grade and Part of Gary's Suicide Note

Eighth Grade and Part of Gary's Suicide Note Summary

Emily says that once she and Brendan reached eighth grade that things really started to change. Groups of kids, or cliques, were starting to form. There were the jock, the cheerleaders and those with high-end designer clothes. All of these kids were in the in crowd and Brendan and Emily felt as if they were not a part of this world at all.

Dustin agrees that there was a drastic change from seventh to eighth grade. He thinks it was because it was their last year of junior high school and the next year they would all be going to high school. Dustin mentions that the high school coach would even come over sometimes to watch them play sports, as if he was scouting them for the following year.

Ryan says that in the middle of eighth grade is when Brenda and Gary really became close friends. Ryan says that it seemed that Brendan and Gary had a secret world, where Ryan and everyone else felt as if they were outsiders.

In a part of Gary's suicide note, he mentions that he could have just killed himself, but then the message he was trying to send would have been lost. By killing other people, Gary feels that it will help other kids treat his peers better.

Eighth Grade and Part of Gary's Suicide Note Analysis

A major transformation takes place within Brendan and Gary during their eighth grade year. They both start to notice how different they truly are from the other kids in their classes. They both start to pull away from others and isolate themselves. Even one of their friends, Ryan, notices that the two boys seem to retreat into their own private world and shut everyone else out.

In his mind, which reveals itself in what Gary says in his suicide note, Gary is justifying killing other people. He is saying that the reason he has chosen to kill his peers is to send a message to other people on how they should treat people.



More of Eighth Grade

More of Eighth Grade Summary

Allison is Gary's on and off again girlfriend. She explains how she thought she knew Gary really well. In retrospect, however, she realizes that she didn't really know Gary at all. She talks about how the only person that really knew Gary was Brendan. Allison says it was as if the two of them even had their own language.

Allison tells a story about a time she and Gary were sitting in the car in her driveway. They were pretending as if they were driving through the desert together. Since Gary had been to the desert before, he was describing the scenery to Allison. At one point, Allison even placed her head on Gary's shoulder. When they looked in the rearview mirror, they saw two of the popular kids looking and pointing at them and laughing. Allison says that both of them were humiliated and that she will never forget the look on Gary's face.

Emily explains how she and Brendan were close until Gary came along. By that time, Emily had made friends with other girls that were "outcasts." Emily says that it seems as if Brendan had a fixation on them being "outcasts," that it was all he wanted to talk about. Emily, on the other hand, was trying to get away from thinking about it and fixating on it all the time, so she started to separate herself from Brendan once he and Gary became friends.

More of Eighth Grade Analysis

Allison describes a world where she and Gary used to escape. Gary had a lot of pain and heartache in his home life and school life. Allison was one of the only people, besides Ryan for a short time, and Brendan, that Gary was able to connect with and be himself. In a twist of irony, even one of the people that Gary was closest to didn't see that he had it inside of him to kill himself and to kill others.

Emily points out numerous signs that Brendan was exhibiting that there was trouble brewing inside of him. Emily could see the signs subconsciously, but didn't connect the thoughts that Brendan was having and his fixated actions on it turning into a school shooting. All of the signs she points out, in hindsight, point to a troubled person that did not have a proper outlet for letting out his stress and frustration. By turning everything inward, the hate and frustration simply brewed inside of Brendan until eventually he exploded.



Ninth Grade

Ninth Grade Summary

Allison says that at the beginning of ninth grade things inside of Brendan and Gary grew even worse. Allison noticed how dark Brendan really was after returning from a two-week trip with her parents away from Gary and Brendan. Gary would always tell Allison that the kids making fun of him at school didn't affect him. Gary would say he was a loser and that it didn't matter that the kids were making fun of him. Allison would defend Gary to himself and tell him that he was not a loser.

Ryan describes how Gary and he would talk about what they would do the kids that picked on them at school. Ryan always thought it was just talk, a way of getting out their frustrations from the bullying. They would sometimes go home and play Doom, blow people up—again as a way of letting out their stress. Ryan says he never really considered retaliating or shooting anyone. Ryan says that Gary got picked on at school, but so did a lot of other kids. If you weren't a jock or a popular kid, then there was a lot of ridiculing, pushing and shoving. Unless, there was a major fight in the hall or something, teachers didn't really know and didn't get involved.

Ryan also tells a story about playing flag football in gym. In the school, there were two games—one for the jocks and one for the losers. One day, one of the jocks tells the losers that he is going to show them how to block in the flag football game. Instead, the jock tackles Brendan so hard that Brendan still looks woozy when he picks himself up off the ground. Ryan talks about how even the newspaper only covers the football stories as hot stories. Even the human-interest stories are about the football players volunteering or doing something in the community. While the other sport teams receive mentions, it is more of a formality than recognition.

One of Gary's and Brendan's schoolmates, Deidre Bunson, says that after the shooting people talk about Middletown High School as if it some kind of a depraved place. She says that her parents say that high school was the same way when they went, and that high schools around the country all the same. Some kids are mean to others and that is just the way it is.

One of the school counselors says that one of Brendan's teachers pointed out his distress to her, so the counselor called Brendan into her office. While they talked, Brendan simply said yes ma'am and no ma'am. The counselor says what she saw in Brendan is what she saw in the 350 other students that she deals with on a daily basis.

Emily describes that there were two worlds among the students—the in-crowd versus the out crowd. If one of the jocks came into class late because he was talking to the football coach, then it was no big deal to the teacher. If one of the nerds did the same thing, however, the teacher would send them to the front office to get a late pass. Emily says this world extended outside of the walls of the classroom and the school as well.



Even around town, the football players receive treatment that is better and different from the rest of the kids.

Ninth Grade Analysis

Allison tries to decipher whether the darkness in Brendan was always there and she didn't notice until she returned from being away from him for awhile. Or, if it was a darkness that grew inside of Brendan because of the way the kids were treating him at school. Gary was seeing himself in the eyes of the other kids. When Gary looked in the mirror, he saw the loser that all of the kids said he was rather than the person he truly was. Even though Allison defended Gary and tried to make him see that he was not a loser, Gary was allowing his peers' thoughts to lead him rather than allowing his own thoughts to lead him.

Ryan just thought that his talks with Gary about retribution was simply venting. Ryan thought that by talking about it and playing doom that both he and Gary were letting out their frustrations and de-stressing. In hindsight, Ryan now realizes that Gary may have been serious about killing and shooting people all along. Similar to what Deidre is saying, Ryan says that everyone who was not popular or was different from the in-crowd was the recipient of bullying and it was simply a way of life in the high school. While Gary, Brendan, Ryan, and the other kids were receiving bullying emotionally, some of the abuse was also physical. Combining the two types of abuse can eventually cause people, such as Gary and Brendan to lose control if they don't feel they have a proper outlet to relieve the stress. An email from Brendan to Gary illustrates the point. Brendan mentions shooting him right in the gut so that the football player can look at Brendan in his eyes as he dies. Ryan points out that society has boosted the football players of Middletown High School on to a pedestal and that everything is about them. This pushes everyone else that is not a football player or a friend or family member of a football player into a different world, one that is separate from the football players and that the outsiders are not a part of the group.

Ryan points out that after someone continues to call you the same name over again, you begin to wonder if you really are that person. Someone calling you names puts self-doubt in your head and if you are not strong enough to overcome it then you either succumb to it or crumble under the pressure. Since Brendan and Gary continue to be the brunt of bullying, they are the ones that end up crumbling under the pressure, which they choose shooting and killing people as their outlet.

Another email from Brendan to Gary further reveals the threats that Brendan was making in response to the way kids were treating him at school. For example, when one of the jocks pushed Brendan right in front of the biology teacher, the biology teacher said that the football players are the leaders of the pack and that there is a societal order that each of us falls into. The email foreshadows Brendan's attack on the teacher when he attacks the students that have been picking on him too.



Deidre is saying that teasing and being mean to kids is a part of socialization and growing up. Indirectly, she is saying that this is the way that things have always been, but it doesn't give someone the right to go around shooting and killing people. Deidre says that the football players should be the ones that receive more respect because they are the ones out there on the field fighting for the school. When something goes wrong on the field or the team loses the game, the players have to deal with that failure. It is as if everything revolves around football in the world of Middletown High School.

The guidance counselor is saying that while Brendan was exhibiting signs of trouble, they were not any more severe than the other kids his age going through the same things. It is possible that she is telling the truth. It is also possible that she was so overworked that she just didn't have the time or the energy to look into his problems deeper.

What Emily is describing is the different classes and statuses of people in life. Even as adults, there are separations between the rich, the poor and the middle class. As adults, the difference in treatment may not be as obvious or cruel, but it is a fact of life. This is why even in the community, people knew who the football players at the high school were, but may not know the name of someone who didn't play sports. In other words, Emily is just saying that the way things were at the school is the way that life is.

One of the football players points out that there is reverse discrimination too. While some of the jocks have high GPAs, it is the nerds or outsiders stereotyped for being smart. The football defends the fact that each group of students and people put the other groups and people into their respective places, that people don't only put themselves in those places.

Everyone saw signs from Brendan and Gary that there was some emotional turmoil inside of them. Brendan wrote poems for English class that talked about killing people and torturing them. Gary would stay home on Saturdays, almost in a spell, rather than go outside and find other kids to play with. Gary often talked about committing suicide, including talking about hanging himself from the flagpole in front of the school. One time, Gary even shimmied up the flagpole as if he was really going to do it. All of these were subliminal messages to the people around them—a crying out for help. Everyone Gary and Brendan were crying out to help for, however, simply saw it as normal teenage angst.



Part of Brendan's Suicide Note and More of Ninth Grade

Part of Brendan's Suicide Note and More of Ninth Grade Summary

Brendan says in his suicide note that the kids made fun of him and even the adults tried to make him conform. Brendan shooting them is his payback for the hell they all put him through. Gary's former girlfriend Alison says that Gary always thought life was big joke. Allison has says that there were different sets of rules for the different sets of students. If a popular kid is disrupting class by talking, the teacher may tell her to stop talking, but if one of the other kids disrupts the class by talking, the teacher makes a big scene.

One of Brendan's classmates describes a class discussion where Brendan insists that there is no God. While the teacher says he is entitled to his opinion, it does not mean there is not a God and that others cannot believe in God.

Ryan points out that there is not one incident that may have led to Brendan and Gary shooting up the school, but there were contributing incidents that added up to the event. One of the big turning points for Brendan, according to Ryan, is when the boys at school give Brendan a swirly. Instead of telling an adult about what happens, Brendan skips school and then gets two-weeks detention for it.

Part of Brendan's Suicide Note and More of Ninth Grade Analysis

Since Gary does not take life seriously, it also suggests that he does not take death seriously either. It infers that Gary may not have realized the consequences of his actions by taking a real gun to school and shooting people. It is possible that Gary thinks of the shooting as more of a video game, where life is imaginary and shooting has no real consequences.

If Brendan does not believe in God, hem like Gary, may not have felt that he would have to answer for his wrongdoings. While Brendan may know that shooting his classmates is wrong, he may not. He may think that there is no after life and therefore no one to answer to once he kills his tormenters and then kills himself. The kids that did not fall into the popular crowd felt there was a double standard for their actions in contrast to the actions of their schoolmates that were athletes or part of the in crowd.

The kids that gave Brendan the swirly did not get in trouble. Brendan didn't want to tell on their because he thought it would make things worse. Ironically, Brendan gets detention for an unexcused absence because he is too embarrassed to come back to school after the swirly incident.



One of the football players says that everyone is looking for someone or something to blame for the shootings. He said that just because he is a football player that some lay the blame on him. He says people say it was the football players bullying Brendan, but it was Brendan that was looking for the trouble.

Gary and Brendan felt that no matter what they did or did not do that they were the losers. They believed that if a high school athlete grows up, he may get a chance to play in the pros. If the athlete does not take a successful career in sports, he takes a successful career in something else. The boys believe that this is simply the way that it is and nothing can change their status in life.



Part of Gary's Suicide Note and the End of Ninth Grade

Part of Gary's Suicide Note and the End of Ninth Grade Summary

Gary tells his mom in his suicide note that he hopes she can move on and start a new life, but for him he is beyond this point and that there isn't any going back. Ryan describes how the three of them would graphically describe how they would get back at the boys that were picking on them. One of Brendan's neighbors talks about how Brendan came over one day to look at his real guns that the neighbor used for gun shows. Ryan says the first gun Brendan bought was from a kid at school.

Ryan says that one day Brendan made a correlation between the shooting video games and shooting someone in real life. After playing a shooting video game, Brendan takes his gun out of his closet and points it at Ryan. Brendan fires the gun but there aren't any bullets in it. Ryan says shooting someone in real life is point and click, just as it is on the video games.

Part of Gary's Suicide Note and the End of Ninth Grade Analysis

Gary feels that there is hope for other people, such as his mom, to start over and make a new life for herself. He does not have the same confidence inside of himself, however. In an email from Brendan to Gary, he says that Columbine is just a symbol or starting point for what will happen at Middletown. There is also some suggestion that other students at other schools around the country made retaliate in the same manner.

Allison describes Brendan's behavior as very erratic. One day, he is the old funny and charming Brendan and then the next day, he is dark and angry. Brendan not only showed signs of planning revenge on the kids at school, but he flat out showed Gary and Allison the gun he bought and told them he was going to use it to kill the kids at school. Even the parents of both boys saw signs of obsession with guns, when Brendan would look and touch each gun he came across, studying it carefully. Gary even asked his mother to buy him a gun, but she was afraid he would use it to kill himself.

Allison also describes a foreshadowing of planning on Brendan's part when Brendan pretends as if he is throwing things off the overpass as the cars pass beneath. The people driving the cars also think it is real because they are swerving and squealing, which Brendan finds funny.

Someone mentions that teenager behavior has become worse over the years. While there is no proof that this is necessarily true, some point to the fact that two-parent



working households makes video games and violent television programs replacements for the values that a parent would teach the children if they were home instead of at work.

Two themes emerged in both the writings that Gary and Brendan left behind. Gary always wrote about the bullying. Brendan always wrote about revenge and destructive behavior. While there is no proof that violent video games and shows cause violent behavior, it ponders the questions as to whether someone who has a tendency to be violent finds justification in the violence of these mediums. The two boys also believe that shootings and being nefarious make you famous and remembered, which encourages them to shoot and kill.



Tenth Grade

Tenth Grade Summary

Chelsea Baker, a student that transferred to Middletown High School in the tenth grade describes how the school was different. Chelsea says the Middletown was a lot more rigid in its ways. Even though there was a popular crowd in her previous school, the line of demarcation was less than at Middletown and the popular kids at her old school were still nice.

Ryan says that drugs became a big part of life at school. Not only were Gary, Brendan and Ryan doing drugs, so are the athletes were. Ryan also describes how he, Allison, Gary and Brendan drive out to the woods and set up a mock bombing situation. After setting up the scene, Gary sets off a bomb and then wants to recreate the scene to ensure that the bomb he has built is effective.

Allison talks about the obsession that Gary had with guns and bombs. One day, Gary reads a story in the newspaper about a bombing at an abortion clinic. He asks Allison how they learn to make bombs, but she says that she doesn't know. Gary says he wants to go to the library to see if he can find information on building bombs, which he does. One day Allison drives Gary over the state line so that he can buy fireworks from a fireworks stand.

Tenth Grade Analysis

The football players explain their picking on the Gary and Brendan as an outlet for the stress that they have as athletes. They say that not only do they have to keep up with practice, studying play tapes and playing the games, but they also have to keep up with their own school work. It's as if the weaklings in the school represent the scapegoats or outlets for the popular kids to de-stress and blow off steam.

Allison noticed more signs of the darkness in Brendan one night when they go out drinking and driving while Gary is out of town. Brendan has Allison drive in the opposite direction of town, which is mostly farms, land and dark roads. While they're driving, Brendan rolls down his window and starts shooting at things. Then, he opens the glove compartment and uses the light to reload the gun. When they get home, Allison struggles between her attraction to Brendan's unpredictability and the darkness that he seems to have inside of him. This is not even to mention that this is Allison's boyfriend's best friend. Again, the fact that Brendan is shooting at things foreshadows that he is practicing for shooting animate objects, humans, rather than inanimate objects.

The use of drugs combined with the dark thoughts already brewing within Gary and Brendan are not a good combination. The drug usage indicates that it may cause the two boys to lose their inhibitions and may have pushed them into the school shootings more than if they were not doing drugs.



When the football and wrestling teams get to the state championships in the tenth grade, the tables seem to turn. Gary and Brendan seem to start making fun of the jocks more than the jocks are making fun of them. Gary and Brendan choose to pick on the jocks with smirks and sniggers rather than words or actions, but the message comes across to the jocks loud and clear. The smirks and sniggers are a symbol of the calm before the storm; the time before the shooting takes place at the school.

The fact that Gary uses the library computer to find information on building a bomb points out that he knows right from wrong. Especially since Allison tells Gary he can find out that information on the Internet at home. Gary insists, however, that he wants to look it up at the library.

Brendan and Gary had skills that complemented one another, but unfortunately in a bad way. For example, Brendan was a god planner, but Gary was good with his hand. The police reports talk about how intricate the pipe bombs they found were—indicating that Gary built them, not Brendan.

All of the actions the boys exhibited and the words that Gary and Brendan spoke or wrote was a blueprint for the school shooting incident. The people who knew about all of it simply chose to ignore it or didn't believe the boys would act on their threats.

The fight between the football player Sam Flach and Brendan at Dustin's party may have been the breaking point for Brendan and Gary. Everyone knew about the fight—parents, teachers, the administrators, and other kids—but nobody thought it was more than what was on the surface, which was a fight between two boys that don't get along.



The Day it Happened

The Day it Happened Summary

Brendan calls Emily, which he hadn't really spoken to in a while, to let her know that he had been rejected from a military school that he had applied. The school dance that night is held in the gym at school. Emily runs into Allison at Blockbuster. When Emily tells Allison that Brendan called Emily to make sure that she wasn't going to be at the dance, Allison got a creepy feeling and decided to walk over to the school to see what was going on.

Dustin describes how Brendan and Gary entered the gym, dressed in camouflage, and started shooting. While the two masked gunmen, which everyone recognizes as Brendan and Gary, are shooting and yelling, they are instructing everyone to lie face down on the floor. One of the teachers, Mr. Curry, tries to take control of the situation, pointing his walkie-talkie at Gary and telling him to put the gun down. Gary shoots Mr. Curry in the chest, but Mr. Curry survives.

One of the first people Gary and Brendan secure with plastic ties is the football Sam Flach. Brendan and Gary move on to tie the wrists of the other kids, even Dustin, which is Brendan's neighbor. The boys had planned very carefully because they tied up all of the football players, athletes and bigger size boys first. Then they took away the walkie-talkies to prevent the teachers from calling for help. Brendan and Gary shoot Sam in both knees and then start shooting up into the air again. When the kids in the gym hear clicking and clacking sounds, they realize that Brendan and Gary are reloading, that they have plenty of ammunition and they plan to use it.

The Day it Happened Analysis

Emily found it ironic that Brendan would apply to a military school. She believes the military school was a symbol of a lifeline for Brendan. It was his last hope to survive the last two years of high school that Brendan had left. When the lifeline disappeared, it seems as if so did Brendan's final bit of hope. When Brendan asks Emily if she is going to the dance that night and she says no, he insists on making sure that she won't be there. This foreshadows the plan Brendan has to seek revenge on his classmates at the dance, but wants to make sure that people like Emily, who were there for him, will not be present.

The school gym is the perfect place for trapping and carrying out a shooting spree. First, there are no windows in the gym. There are only four doors into and out of the gym and the doors are made of metal, which makes it hard for those inside to get out and those outside to get in. In addition, Brendan and Gary chained the doors to the gym shut, which makes it double impossible for getting in and out once they have their prey trapped.



One of the students points out that the plan the boys carried out was very specific. Even when you hear about other school shootings, or teens that have gone "crazy," these students plan to shoot at their peers at school, rather than random people at a public location. In other words, it is a very planned, organized and planned act. This doesn't make them crazy, but instead makes them smart and calculated. Then the police cut the electricity to the gym. When the lights go out, Allison yells out to Gary to let him know she is in the gym, which is an unexpected twist for both Brendan and Gary. Many of the kids start yelling at Allison to talk to them, thinking that she can reason with Gary and Brendan to stop.



Gary's Suicide Note and The Dance

Gary's Suicide Note and The Dance Summary

Gary writes a suicide note to his mother to apologize to her for the school shooting and the reason for the school shooting. He says that the reason he is killing himself after killing his classmates is to send a message. The kids in the gym hear the first bomb go off outside of the gym. Brendan and Gary tell everyone it's a bomb so that outsiders know that they don't want to be bothered while they are taking care of the mission they have come here to accomplish. This is affirmation for the students inside of the gym that they are going to die.

Sam Flach is the primary and first target of the shooting. Brendan and Gary talk about what their plans are with Sam loud enough for all of the students in the gym to hear. Brendan and Gary do not have plans to kill Sam right away. They want him to suffer first and so they talk about shooting him in the back of the kneecap to incapacitate him or possibly cripple him.

The police use the school system loudspeaker to communicate with Brendan and Gary. Unfortunately, the police took a threatening stance, rather than a sympathetic one that gave Brendan and Gary a reason to put their guns down and let the hostages go. The police start telling the boys about all of the laws that they have broken.

Gary's Suicide Note and The Dance Analysis

Not only does Gary believe that killing his classmates and killing himself is the best option for fixing the problem of bullying and changing a bad life, but he also sees it as an opportunity for his mother to start a new and fresh life, where she will be happier. Some of the kids in the gym ponder why Brendan and Gary did not start killing people right away, but then they realize that the point is to send a message—to torment and scare them the way that all of those kids tormented and scared Brendan and Gary all this time. Gary and Brendan even brought flashlights and snacks with them, along with their guns and bombs, which drives home the point that the boys were there to torment their peers before killing them.

With the police threatening punishment for the laws Brendan and Gary are breaking, it puts the boys deeper into the hole they already feel they are in. Brendan and Gary don't feel safe and secure in school or at home. They also know that they won't find solace and peace in jail either. At this point, the police are providing affirmation to the boys that their only way out is to kill their peers and then kill themselves. Some of the bullets that ricocheted off the ceiling did graze some of the students, but none of them were injured badly. It becomes quiet for a moment and everyone in the gym hears Gary tell Brendan that they need to talk.



Brendan's Suicide Note and The End

Brendan's Suicide Note and The End Summary

Brendan writes his suicide note to the people of Middletown. He even hopes they print in the newspaper the reason for the shooting is they tormented him and made his life miserable. Gary telling Brendan that they need to talk foreshadows that Gary does not want to carry out their plan. It may be that Allison being in the gym has created his change of heart, or it may simply be that Gary is more sensitive than Brendan, and Gary is having a realization that what they are doing is just not right. Gary tells Brendan that he is still with Brenda all the way, but they have to figure out a way to get Allison out of the gym. Everyone then hears a drilling sound and when the boys flash their flashlights, they see that the police have dropped a camera into the gym from the ceiling.

By the time the camera lowers into the gym, Paul, one of the football players has wiggled his hands out of the ties. Paul tells Dustin that his hands are free and Dustin tells Paul that he has clippers in his front pocket so that Paul can cut off Dustin's ties too. The lights that have not been shot out come back on and the police drop a microphone through the ceiling as well. At the same time that Paul cuts off Dustin's ties, Gary shoots himself. Dustin jumps to his feet and starts to run and overtake Brendan. Dustin tackles Brendan hard and the gun flies out of Brendan's hands and across the gym floor. While Dustin was holding Brendan down, Gary was cutting the ties off the other kids, but the police were telling the kids to stay away from the gym doors. A bunch of other boys ran over to where Brendan was and started stomping on his head. When Allison tells one of the teachers the boys are killing Brendan, the teacher goes over to try to stop them.

Brendan's Suicide Note and The End Analysis

It's ironic that Gary writes his suicide note to his mother, but Brendan writes his suicide note to the people of the town of Middletown. Gary starts shooting up in the air again, but the kids in the gym do not know this, so they think that the boys are shooting and killing people.

Paul getting his hands free foreshadows that he may try to overtake Gary and Brendan. The problem is that it is one against two. When Paul tells Dustin that his hands are free and Dustin tells Paul he has clippers that will set Dustin free, then it brings the odds up so that there are two unarmed boys against two armed boys. The students notice that the voice on the police microphone is not the same voice as the original police contact, which infers the police have brought in a professional hostage negotiator. The police also try to appeal to the boys' emotions by putting their parents on the mike to talk to them. This has the adverse effect because Brendan threatens to shoot Sam Flach in the head if they don't remove the mike and camera immediately, which the police do.



In a twist of irony, Allison goes to Sam and uses her belt as a tourniquet to help stop the bleeding. Brendan threatens to kill her, but Allison simply shouts back at Brendan that she's not afraid to die either, so she's going to help save Sam's life. Gary and Brendan are arguing again. Beth, one of the students, realizes that the only reason that they would be arguing about whether or not Allison was there is if the boys plan to kill everyone, which Beth now realizes is their plan.

Allison looks for another belt to use on Sam's other leg. When she goes to Paul, she realizes that he is just pretending that his hands are still tied and that he has nail clippers in his hand. Ironically, Allison does not tell Gary and Brendan, but simply goes to take one of the other boy's belts from him. In the end, the doctors say that what Allison did saved Sam's life.

Ironically, in the end, the only person that ends up dead is Gary. Sam is injured and Mr. Curry, one of the teachers is injured. Both however survive. Brendan is in a coma from the boys stomping on his head and on life support. Unfortunately, the doctor says that the brain damage is irreversible.



Characters

Gary Searle

Gary Searle comes from a single-parent home. His parents had a very bitter divorce and he lives with his mother in Middletown. Gary has always been a little overweight and teased by his classmates throughout the years because of this. Gary has an on again and off again girlfriend, Allison, who he spends time with and confides in. In the ninth grade, Gary meets Brenda, who is a new boy that moves to Middletown. The boys find a friendship and closeness in the fact that they are outsiders to their other classmates. Gary suffers from isolation and depression. His mother attributes this to the bad divorce, but encourages Gary to get out, make new friends and do normal teenager activities. Gary's mom even takes him to a psychologist to work through his issues. Gary is also friends with one of the athletes and popular boys, Ryan Clancy, but Ryan notices numerous signs that there is a dark side to Gary and starts to distance himself from Gary when Brendan moves to town. Brendan enjoys playing violent video games, such as Doom and other shooting games.

Brendan Lawlor

Brendan moved to Middletown High School from Springfield in the middle of the ninth grade. When Brendan first moves to Middletown, he becomes friends with another new student, Emily. Emily says that all Brendan talks about is his old school and how horrible all of the kids are at Middletown, so Emily slowly starts to distance herself from Brendan. Brendan also shows many signs of being a threat to his classmates in emails and conversations that he has with Gary and Allison. Brendan talks a lot about whom he would seek revenge on at the school and how he would go about doing it. Many students describe Brendan as the one being in control, between him and Brendan, and that there was a true dark side inside of Brendan.

Allison Findley

Allison Findley is an overweight girl with low self-esteem that attends Middletown High School. She has known Gary since they were little and the two have dated on and off over the years. While Allison is privy to the conversations, and even part of the conversations, that Gary and Brendan have about seeking revenge on their classmates, she believes it is just talk. In the end, Allison saves the lives of all of the students because Gary refuses to carry out the plan knowing that Allison is in the gym. Allison is also the one that cares for Sam Flach and helps him stop the bleeding in both of his legs. She stands up to Brendan so that she can do what she needs to do to save Sam.



Ryan Clancy

Ryan Clancy is a football player at Middletown High School. He is friends with Gary Searle for a while. When Brendan moves into town, however, Brendan and Gary form a bond, as if they live in their own separate world, which pushes Ryan out. While Ryan is a football player, he never partakes in teasing and tormenting Gary and Brendan like some of the other football players do. Ryan also sees many signs that lead up to the incident in the gym at school, but doesn't believe that it will lead to a shooting or true revenge. Ryan is the one that ends up tackling Brendan in the gym and holding him down, while the other boy, Paul, unties everyone else. Ryan does not participate in the kicking and beating of Brendan, but he does not try to stop the boys that are kicking Brendan in his head either.

Cynthia Searle

Cynthia Searle is Gary's mom. She is divorced from Gary's dad and Gary lives with Cynthia. To help Gary cope with the divorce, Cynthia takes Gary to a psychologist. When Gary writes his suicide note, he addresses it to his mom.

Brett Betzig

Brett is a childhood friend of Brendan's from Springfield, which is where Brendan lived prior to moving to Middletown. Brett met Brendan in the second grade and went to school with Brendan up until the seventh grade. He describes Brendan as athletic and popular in Springfield.

Julie Shore

Julie Shore is another friend of Brendan's from Springfield. She describes Brendan as always being on edge and wary of others. Julie says it seems as if Brendan was not comfortable in his own skin, even prior to moving to Middletown and enduring the bullying.

Sam Flach

Sam Flach is one of the Middletown football players. Sam says that everyone is looking for someone to blame for the shootings, so they blame the athletes and popular kids for bullying Brendan and Gary. Sam is also the primary target of Brendan and Gary when they take over the school dance. They kick him in the head and try to get Sam to roll over so they can shoot him in the knees.

Dustin Williams

Dustin Williams is Brendan's neighbor in Middletown. Dustin also plays on the football team. Dustin becomes friends with Brendan and Gary at first. After Dustin realizes that all Brendan and Gary want to do is play video games, and it seems as if Brendan and Gary are in their own little world, Dustin distances himself from both boys. While he is on the football team, Dustin does not bully Gary or Brendan.

Allen Curry

Allen Curry is the principal of Middletown High School. When Brendan and Gary take over the dance, the first adult they shoot is Allen Curry. They also take away Allen's walkie talkie so that he cannot call in other adults, teachers and administrators for help. Allen survives the shooting.



Objects/Places

Doom

Doom is a violent shooting video game. This particular video game was a game that Gary and Brendan played a lot. Ryan Clancy says when the boys played the video game, it was as if they were in a trance and you could not talk to them or draw their attention away from the game. Some of the students and adults in the novel blame violent games such as this for contributing to violent behavior, including school shootings.

Guns

Brendan exhibited an obsession with guns. He even bought his first gun from a boy at school. Brendan enjoyed attending gun shows, handling guns and learning information about guns. Brendan even correlates how the point and click shooting video games is the same as shooting a real gun. Brendan proceeds to buy other guns, and is presumably the one that bought the guns that he and Gary used to shoot during the school dance.

Middletown High School

Middletown High School is the primary location of the events in the novel. While it is representative of many high schools across the country, some students say the demarcation line between the cliques at school was more prominent at Middletown than in other high schools. The students say that the teachers and administrators helped to perpetuate the gap between the popular kids and the other groups of kids by placing an emphasis on the athletic programs over education, grades and learning. Many of the students say that the adults in school would even look the other way when there were altercations between the popular kids and the other kids, which perpetuated the torment and the problems existing between different groups of kids at the school.

School Gym

The school gym is the place where the shooting takes place. Brendan and Gary enter the school dance with masks, bombs, and guns. They also chain shut all four entrances of the gym. The gym represents the location where Brendan and Gary intend to seek revenge on their tormentors.



Springfield

Springfield is the town where Brendan lived prior to moving to Middletown. In Springfield, Brendan was an athlete and a relatively popular kid in school. All of this changed for Brendan when he moved to Middletown.

Suicide Notes

Both Brendan and Gary each write a suicide note. The suicide notes explain the reasons why each boy has decided to hold their classmates hostage, kill them, and then commit suicide.

Walkie Talkies

The teachers and administrators at Middletown High School wear walkie talkies on their hips. They use the walkie talkies to communicate with each other, especially to call in reinforcements if there is a problem, such as a fight. The walkie talkie is one of the first things that Gary and Brendan take away from the teacher in the gym when they take charge at the school dance.

Nail Clippers

The nail clippers in Dustin William's pocket is what allows Paul, one of the students that had worked his hands free from the restraints, to cut off Dustin and the other boys restraints. Without the nail clippers, it may not have been possible to free enough boys to stop Brendan from continuing with his plan to kill his hostages and classmates.

Chains

Gary and Brendan use chains to lock each of the doors in the gym. Chaining the doors shut doesn't allow anyone to come in or leave the gym.

Gym Loudspeaker

The gym loudspeaker allows the police to make contact with Gary and Brendan in the gym. The loudspeaker also allows the boys' parents to talk to them—all in an attempt to try to stop Gary and Brendan from carrying out their plans.



Themes

Competition

The primary theme of the novel is competition. Middletown High School, and even in the town of Middletown, places a great emphasis on the athletes in town. This is especially true of the football players and the wrestlers. The emphasis on athletes perpetuates the competition that causes the separation of the athletes from the other students in the school. While school is about education, the competitive theme in this novel makes the success of the athletics department in the school compete with the academic program.

The dividing line puts the athletes at the school on a pedestal. The status that the athletes hold makes them untouchable when it comes to getting in trouble at school. The dividing line is something that all of the students, teachers and administrators notice and acknowledge, yet nobody does anything to bring together the students, rather than divide them. Since the athletes are on a pedestal, many of the athletes use their position to pick on the other students in school. Brendan and Gary are but two of the targets of this bullying.

Even though Brendan and Gary are best friends and in the revenge plan together, in the end, there is even competition between the two of them. Brendan wants to Gary out their plan to kill their classmates and commit suicide n matter what. Gary starts to have second thoughts about this when he finds out that Allison is in the gym, which starts a competition between Brendan and Gary as to whether or not they should carry out the plan. The competition rises to such a level that it pushes Gary to commit suicide before he carries out the plan to kill his classmates first.

Coming of Age

Another one of the primary themes that run throughout the novel is growing up and coming of age, even against adversity, such as bullying by classmates or not fitting into the popular crowd. In some way, each of the characters learns lessons about growing up and dealing with responsibilities in life. Each of the characters also learns to face the adverse affects of going through the normal stress and situations that occur in high schools all across the country.

Each character in the book deals with their own struggles with going through high school and then dealing with the aftermath of the school shooting, especially what led up to the shooting and if there was one or more root reasons for what happened. Both the students and adults question whether exposure to normal teenage experiences or extensive ones is what pushed Gary and Brendan to their violent acts.

The theme reveals that coming of age guides students in very different ways. Gary and Brendan were certainly not the only students at school in the nerd crowd, new or in another clique at school. While the athletes or the popular crowd bully kids, some of the



kids simply choose to look the other way. Many of the students simply attributed the bullying to being a natural part of growing up and being in high school. Even some of the parents, teachers, and school administrators saw what was going on at the school as normal rites of passage for teenagers and high schoolers.

Gun Control

Gun control is another one of the major issues addressed in the novel. There is a lot of debate as to whether people kill people or that people who have access to guns are what causes people to kill people. In the novel, even adults allowed the children, such as Brendan, Gary and Ryan to have complete access to guns. The question then becomes if Gary and Brendan did not have access to guns and information about guns, would it have led to the school shooting, or would the boys have simply found another way to seek their revenge? Gun control is an issue that has plagued this nation for years, but now it is an issue creeping into schools across the nation and not just high schools either.



Style

Point of View

The novel is in the first-person point of view of each of the people involved in the novel. Each person tells his or her own story with a unique perspective. The writing of the novel combines each person's stories to tell the overall story of Brendan, Gary and the school shooting. Each character is looking back and telling the story from the past forward.

The point of view of this novel is an intimate point of view that allows a reader to connect closely with each of the characters in the novel so the reader can see the point of view from the vantage point of all of those that are involved. The reader cares about what happens to each of the characters in the book, even Gary and Brendan, who end up seeking revenge on their peers and tormentors by killing them. The point of view also allows the author to inject his own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place around the characters without having to interrupt the flow of the narration. For these reasons, the point of view works well with this novel and the author's writing style.

Setting

The novel is set primarily at Middletown High School and the town of Middletown. The setting of this novel is important because it represents not only what was happening in Middletown High School, but also what is occurring in other schools around the country. The main characters of the novel are teenagers. For this reason, the setting of the novel has a strong impact on the characters because they live constantly in the stressful and sometimes downright cruel world of junior high school and high school.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is very conversational and modern. Although the language of the novel is not formal, it uses language that is in daily usage. The language is from the late '90s and early 2000s. The language is educated, strong and descriptive enough that it creates a flow that leaves the reader impressed with the words as much as the plot when the novel ends.

The language of the novel is appropriate to the plot because it is accurate to the characters in the novel and the education level of the writer. The novel is not in love with its own words, but it is descriptive enough that the reader finds enjoyment in the words as well as the plot. The language is not difficult to understand, however, and everything is clear in its context. Hence the language of the novel fits well with the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel divides the chapters by timeframe. For example, each chapter covers the grade that the students were in as the story is unfolding or the event that the chapter covers. Each chapter is one to twenty pages long. The chapters tell the story dialogue from the characters that were involved in the novel. The author also injects his own voice in footnotes of research, in the introduction and in the postscript, which is his opinion based on the interviews and research he has conducted to tell a fictional story, but on a phenomenon that is sweeping the country.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is competition among different cliques in high school. One subplot follows the coming of age of each of the characters in the novel. In addition, it covers how each character deals with these changes in their lives. Another subplot follows gun control issues in the United States.



Quotes

"A lot of kids play computer games and junk, but it was different with Gary. The thing about him was he was on [the computer] all the time" (About Gary, p. 14).

"Here's why. You made my friggin' life miserable" (Part of Brendan Lawlor's Suicide Note, p. 17).

"She actually cried a little and confided in me that Brendan could be very difficult. He wasn't cooperative about doing chores, and he would blow up when he got upset. She said there were days when he was practically impossible to get out bed and ready for school" (About Brendan, p. 22).

"At first all he could talk about was how big the school was and how much he missed his old friends and his old school. I mean, I didn't mind it so much, because I felt like I was about the only person he had to talk to, and, frankly, I was in the same boat. But after a while it did start to get kind of repetitious, and I told him so. It was like day and night. After that, he never said a thing about his old friends or his old school" (Seventh Grade, p. 28).

"I don't think Brendan and Gary really clicked until around the middle of eighth grade, but once they did, it was a lock" (Eighth Grade, p. 30).

"If I go this way, taking the people who made my life miserable with me, then maybe it will send a message" (Part of Gary's Suicide Note, p. 31).

"i don't know why, but Brendan couldn't get past the weirdness. He was more fixated on it. It was almost all he would talk about. I was trying to get away from it. He just wanted to keep looking at it under a microscope" (More of Eighth Grade, p. 33).

"There was something dark inside of Brendan" (Ninth Grade, p. 35).

"All I've done is pay you back in-kind" (Part of Brendan's Suicide Note, p. 59).

"It's stupid to point at one incident and say, 'It's all because of this'" (More of Ninth Grade, p. 61).

"You can start over. I wish I was there with you, but I'm past the point of no return" (Part of Gary's Suicide Note, p. 69).

"I will kill every friggin' one of them. It's going to be Columbine all over again, only better" (The End of Ninth Grade, p. 71).

"They talked about guns and they talked about bombs" (Tenth Grade, p. 101).



"Every year you hear about kids walking into their school and shooting their classmates and teachers...They always go to their own school. It's not random. It's a message, and the sooner we wake up and listen, the better" (The Day It Happened).

"I don't know if I can explain why I did this" (Gary's Suicide Note, p. 133).

"I remember wondering why they didn't start shooting kids right away. And I thought, Oh, no, killing us isn't the point. They have some stupid message they want us to hear first" (The Dance, p. 136).

"I hope this gets printed in big, bold letters on the front page of the newspaper, because it's something every single one of you should read" (Brendan's Suicide Note, p. 152).

"I'm not sure I believe in miracles, but ever since that night, I definitely believe in angels. Only you never know who they might be or what form they might take. If Allison Findley could be an angel, anyone could" (The End, p. 163).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Gary Searle? Why has he come to live in Middletown? What are his interactions like with the other kids from his junior high school before Brendan moves to Middletown? Who is Gary closest to before Brendan moves to town? Why? What does Gary recall about his childhood? What is the moment in Gary's life that seemed to change him forever? Why is this important? How does it change Gary's life?

Who is Brendan Lawlor? Why does he form a friendship with Gary when they really come from two different worlds? Why does Brendan think he and Gary are alike? Do you think the differences in Brendan and Gary bring them together as close friends? Do you think it is the differences of the two boys that creates a close relationship? How does Gary feel about carrying out their plan? How does the reader know this? Is Brendan responsible for Gary's death? Explain.

Discuss the relationship between Gary and Brendan. Are they friends? Is their competition in their relationship? How does Brendan feel about Gary? How does Gary feel about Brendan? Does Brendan take advantage of Gary's weaknesses and strengths to carry out Brendan's own desires? What happens to Brendan? Explain.

What are some of the reasons the characters cite as the reasons Gary and Brendan planned the shooting and bombing? What do you think caused the boys to plan the attack on their schoolmates? Why do you think they shot the teacher first? Why do you think the focus of their second attack was Sam Flach? Do you think Brendan and Gary would have carried out the plan if Gary had not killed himself?

Who is Allison Findley? Why does she decide to go to the school dance that night? What happens? Why does Allison shout out to let Gary know she is there? Why does Gary become upset and start arguing with Brendan? What does Allison do to help the situation? What happens because of her actions?

Do you think the video games and guns made Brendan and Gary plan the school shooting? Why or why not? Do you believe that violence comes from watching violence, or is the origin from a different place?

Discuss gun control. What impact does it have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them? Why is gun control an issue in the U.S.? Do guns and violent video games related to shooting have anything to do with Gary and Brendan's actions against their schoolmates, teachers, and administrators? How does each character learn to explain the school shooting?