

Gym Candy Study Guide

Gym Candy by Carl Deuker

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Plot Summary

Carl Deuker's novel "Gym Candy" details the rise and fall of high school football star Mick Johnson.

Attending Shilshole High School in Seattle, Washington, Mick Johnson is the son of Mike Johnson, a former college star and NFL player whose career was ended by an injury. Mick wants to be just like his father, and wants to be an even better football player. But Mick soon discovers that his father's career was not ended by an injury, but by his father's arrogance when he was arrested for drunk driving, skipped team meetings, fought with his teammates, and became a liability.

When Mick becomes first string running back on the high school team, he knows that he needs to keep his edge. He begins weightlifting at a local gym called Popeye's suggested by his father. There, Mick meets Peter Volz, a personal trainer who begins working with Mick. Peter introduces Mick to steroids, which Mick takes until tryouts are over. He experiences rage and depression, as well as bad acne and growing breasts as side effects of the drugs. He then moves on to taking injections and becomes addicted to them through the following football season.

The injections also help cause paranoia. When Mick's closest friend, Drew, discovers what Mick is doing, Mick attempts to commit suicide knowing that he has run out of chances and has let his team down. Mick is sent to a rehabilitation center where the book ends without Mick's addiction being cured.



Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Mick Johnson's earliest memory is of playing football with his father when he was four. Mick's father Mike is bigger and stronger than any of his friend's fathers, who lay on the couch all day. Mick's father, though a former football star, is still very much in shape. The Johnson family basement is full of his father's awards and framed newspaper articles. Mick's mother is a former gymnast who enjoys competition, but doesn't feel the need to pressure Mick the way her husband Mike does.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Mick's life becomes football at an early age between his father's past and his father's desire to see Mick play. Mick also wants to be something important like his father was, and he notices that whereas his friends' fathers lay around, his father is strong and active. This seems to confirm in Mick's mind a sense of greatness about his father, and it is a greatness that Mick wants to aspire to. Yet his mother, who is also athletically gifted, does not feel the need to pressure her son the way her husband does.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Mick's father makes Mike begin kindergarten a year later than his friends so that Mick is older and bigger than his classmates. Between his father's lessons and his size, Mick is far better than his friends playing little league football. Mick's mother doesn't like that everything in his life was about football, but all Mick ever wants to do is play football. This however is at the insistence of his father.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Mick's father is well-prepared for his son's entrance into football. In order to give him an edge in terms of size and speed, Mick is kept out of school for an extra year before beginning kindergarten. This is common practice in many places in the United States. As time progresses, Mick comes to love football more and more. It is the only thing that he ever wants to do.



Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

By the end of elementary school, Mick figures out his father isn't perfect. While his mother works at a bank in the loan department, Mick's father is the sidekick on the local radio show "Ben in the A.M." with Ben Braun. Mick asks his father how someone who had never played sports could do most of the talking on the radio show, while someone who had does so little talking. Mike explains to Mick that Ben has a radio voice and a college degree.

When Mick hears the radio show, sometimes he hears Ben call his father "Mr. Third-Rounder". Mick understands that being picked for third round in the NFL is not a positive thing. His father explains to Mick that he was injured, but was kept on as long as possible. In the process, he made half-a-million dollars for signing. In order to make himself feel better, Mick tells his friends at school that his father was far better when he played football than he actually was.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Mick's father emerges as a has-been football star, who was derailed due to an ankle injury. While his current position in life may not be great, Mick is assured with the confidence that his father played hard and played well until he was injured. This continues to cause Mick to inflate his father's image to his friends, to inflate his father's image in his own mind. Whereas Mick's father once occupied a perfect, legendary status in his mind, now his father evolves into something near mythical.



Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

In seventh grade, Mick writes an essay for his teacher, Mr. Pengilly, about football. The essay receives an F because Mick doesn't make football come alive enough. That night, thinking about football, Mick realizes that it isn't fun, but hard work -especially as a running back. And he realizes that this is what he loves about the game, that it is hard work.

Mick rewrites the essay, and receives an A+ on it.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Mick realizes that he loves football because it is hard work. He enjoys putting in an effort and enjoys the reward of the effort. He feels accomplished because hard work means satisfying results when the results are good.

Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

After seventh grade, Mick's mom stops coming to his games after he is nearly knocked unconscious. She is too afraid he will be severely injured like his father. But Mick doesn't want to quit, because he loves football and knows it is his life.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

The absence of Mick's mother from his future football games can also be seen in the light of her relative absence from her life. Though she is always there, she is not the dominant force the way that Mick's father is. This could also explain why her name is not mentioned, and why Mick does mention his father's name.

Yet, Mick's mother will play a crucial role in the coming years.

Part 1, Chapter 6

Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

Mr. Rooney is Mick's new football coach in eighth grade. Rooney had played ball at Oregon State when he was in college and knows who Mick Johnson's father is. Rooney takes to calling Mick "Red" and nothing that Mick does is ever good enough for Rooney. Mick's father explains that in college, he ran over Rooney in the end zone, and the play ended up on SportsCenter. Mick's father advises Mick to ignore Rooney, but Mick can't ignore him.

Drew Carney, a new member of the team, is quarterback, and Rooney tells everyone to be more like Drew. During practice one day, Rooney tells Mick he has the talent of an all-star, and the attitude of a punk, and he'll never get anywhere. Mick wants to quit, but his father will not let him.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Mick's father's reputation precedes Mick, when Mick's eighth grade football coach seems to be much harder on Mick than any of the other players. Mick's father recollects that he trounced Rooney during a game years before, and the bitterness probably still exists. But Mick senses it is more than just the play that Rooney despises, for the phrase "attitude of a punk" sticks out to Mick.

It is also during practice that Mick meets Drew who will become his closest friend and will be profoundly instrumental in the trials ahead.



Part 1, Chapter 7

Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

At home, Mick's father's old football friend Bull Tinsley calls. Bull has extra tickets to the Mariner's game and invites Mick's father and Mick. Mick declines. While Mike is gone, Mick looks him up on Google because he wants to understand what Rooney meant by "attitude of a punk". Mick discovers his father had been fights with teammates, arguments with coaches, had missed meetings, had been arrested for drunk driving, an incident with strippers, and so on. That is the real reason why Mike was cut.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Mick discovers his father was indeed a punk player when he was in football. He is horrified at what his father's past is actually like. Both he and his father elevated that time in football to a mythical status. Mick also discovers that his father has lied to him and this crushes Mick. His father wasn't injured, but was cut for poor behavior.



Part 1, Chapter 8

Part 1, Chapter 8 Summary

Mick knows Mike's explanation of an ankle injury is a lie. Mick's father discovers he has looked him up online, and is furious. His father is incensed, and drives off.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

Not only does Mick's discovery of his father's past crush his own spirit, but it crushes his father's spirit, who runs off for the night to spend it alone. So now not only does Mick see his father as a failure and a liar, his father can also perhaps be seen as something of a coward, running away for the night rather than confronting the situation.

Part 1, Chapter 9

Part 1, Chapter 9 Summary

When his father leaves, Mick shuts himself up in his room. At lunch, Mick's mother decides to talk to him. She explains that while what his father did was wrong, it wasn't something like murder. She also tells Mick not to let football consume his life.

When Mick's father gets home, they go for a drive outside of Seattle. Mick's father explains to him the article is true and that he wasted his chances. Mike hasn't told his son Mick about his past before because he still wanted to be a hero to his son. After that, their relationship changes. No longer does Mike talk about his past, but he and Mick talk about Mick's future games.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Analysis

Mick's mother proves to be a bridging force between him and his father. She explains that some things can be forgiven. Mick's father returns in a better mood, and he and Mick talk things out. Their conversations now shift focus from Mike's past to Mick's future. In so doing, a new level of pressure builds on Mick: not only to be better than his father at the game, but to be a better quality player as well.

Part 2, Chapter 1

Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

Using his father as a model of how not to be, Mick pushes himself, outdoing everyone. Rooney and Drew are both impressed, and Drew invites Mick to play football with other kids at Crown Hill Park. A kid named DeShawn Free is also there, who is friends with Drew. Drew and Mick discover they have good chemistry together while playing.

At one of the games, Mick discovers he is being scouted by Mr. Trahane, the defensive backfield coach for Shilshole High School.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Mick takes his father's past to heart and sets out to outdo that past. As Mick trains, he discovers as well the value of camaraderie when he not only continues his friendship with Drew and DeShawn, but also with his understanding that they play well together. Mick's talents are being scouted by high school coaches, and Mick can feel the pressure increasing.

Part 2, Chapter 2

Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary

Drew and Mick become fast friends off the field as well, hanging out at each others' houses. Mick is now fifteen, and receives a cell phone for Christmas. His father is also offered a job with a different radio program, which he takes.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Analysis

Mick's friendship with Drew continues, as the two of them become more than simple football teammates. This friendship will prove especially important in coming chapters. Meanwhile, another incident of note occurs, in that Mick's father receives a new job with better pay and better benefits. This will also prove to be crucial in the next few months.



Part 2, Chapter 3

Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary

Mick and Drew continue their friendship and look forward to spring football. Drew tells Mick how good at football he is. Mick gets a call from the head football coach at Shilshole High, Mr. Downs. Downs wants Mick to try out with the varsity team.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Analysis

Mick and Drew are both good players, and they feed off of each others' encouragement. Mick is thrilled to learn that he will be trying out for the varsity team, which adds yet another dimension of pressure. Mick seems to be handling pressure fairly well.

Part 2, Chapter 4

Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary

Drew is also offered the chance to work with Shilshole's varsity team, and he and Mick head to Shilshole High together. DeShawn Free and a fellow friend, Brad Middleton, are there as well. The first practice is rough, but Mick's father encourages Mick that second practices are always better. The end of the week rolls around, and the team rosters are posted. Mick, DeShawn, and Drew all make varsity.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Analysis

Mick is excited to learn that he will indeed be on the varsity team, though what string he will be a part of, he is not yet sure. He has played his hardest all week, and he hopes that it will pay off. Success at this point is not an issue but it is the kind of success that troubles Mick. Where on the team will he be?

Part 1, Chapter 5

Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Mick, Drew, DeShawn, and the football team practices on their own through the summer, because coaches are not allowed to watch them until the season begins. In June, Mick gets his learner's permit to drive. His mom teaches him how to drive her Honda, and Mick's father promises him to teach him how to work the clutch in his jeep when he is comfortable with the Honda.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

In addition to Mick's success on the football field, he also enjoys increasing responsibilities at home, learning how to drive. Not only is the pressure aligning in Mick's life, but so are the rewards for those pressures, such as driving (which itself also adds another dimension of pressure, though to a different extent than football).

Part 2, Chapter 6

Part 2, Chapter 6 Summary

Official practices start. Mick wants to replace Matt Drager as a starter, but knows it will be tough work. Drager is injured, and it gives Mick a chance to show off. He makes it to the end zone without being touched. The following Monday, depth charts are posted.

Even though Mick has outplayed Drager, Mick is a freshman and will not be a starter. Mick asks his father for advice, and Mick's father tells Mick to outwork Drager.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Analysis

Pressure at football increases when Mick tries to outdo Matt Drager, which he does. But because Mick is a freshman, he will not be allowed to start. This proves tremendously frustrating for Mick, who knows he is better than Drager.

Part 2, Chapter 7

Part 2, Chapter 7 Summary

Mick continues playing hard, not just because he knows it could help him, but because he doesn't know how else to play. After practice the next Monday, Coach Downs asks Mick to come to his office. Because of Mick's hustle and attitude, he is made special teams captain.

His mother is very proud of him, but his father is unfazed by the appointment. His father contends that if Mick is good enough to be captain, he is good enough to start. When Mick asks to start, Coach Downs tells him to stop asking.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

Mick does make headway on the team, and becomes special teams captain. Although Mick is thrilled with him, his father is quick to remind him that he isn't starting, and this crushes Mick's happiness. Mick goes to Coach Downs to ask him to start, but Downs dismisses Mick from his office. Mick now faces the pressure of not being able to live up to his father's expectations -and his own- because he knows he should be starting, but he is not allowed to start.



Part 2, Chapter 8

Part 2, Chapter 8 Summary

Mick believes he won't be able to play until the following year. But Drager and Clark were caught drinking at Salmon Bay Park, and are taken to juvenile hall. Coach Downs stresses responsibility to the team. Mick and Drew are moved to first team. DeShawn is also pushed up.

Mick tells his father that night he will be starting on Friday's game against Foothill.

Part 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

Drager is caught drinking, and this gives Mick a chance in the spotlight. Mick is determined to make the most out of being automatically pushed to first string. Mick is also tremendously happy to be able to tell his father that he will be starting in the game against Foothill. Yet this further pressures Mick to perform well, not just to prove himself to his coach, but to reward his father for coming to the game.



Part 2, Chapter 9

Part 2, Chapter 9 Summary

Friday night rolls around. Mick psyches himself up for the game. His father has managed to get half the night off and will be in the stands for as much of the game as he can make.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

Mike is so invested in his son's football career that he is able to take off part of work to come watch the game. Mick is very excited to be able to play, and this shows in the locker room before the game when the team yells and pounds on lockers to get themselves psyched up for the game. The author takes special care to relate to the reader the excitement prevalent before games, and this catches the reader's attention and makes the reader feel attached to the team. The reader thus far has had a personal emotional investment in Mick. He is like any ordinary wide-eyed American dreamer - a quality that exists in every American. Now the reader is behind not just Mick, but the team.



Part 2, Chapter 10

Part 2, Chapter 10 Summary

Foothill High is an undefeated team. The game begins out rough, but Shilshole gets their feet under them. Mick, Drew, and a kid named Perez slowly adjust their tactics against Foothill, and they begin to predict the team's moves. Mick scores a touchdown. Mick does his best to score again, but falls twelve inches short.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

The game against Foothill ends in defeat for Shilshole, and Mick is horrified that he is unable to make the final touchdown -a mere twelve inches away. The reader sees Mick in an official game, adjusting tactics and stretching himself as far as he can go in order to win, yet still the team -and Mick- fall short.



Part 2, Chapter 11

Part 2, Chapter 11 Summary

Mick realizes that Foothill has a perfect season. Mick begins trying to find a reason why he couldn't score the last touchdown, but his father tells him to learn from the experience. But Mick secretly fears he won't be good enough, or that he doesn't have the talent like his father did.

Part 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

The pressure on Mick before the game was immense, but the pressure on Mick following the game is tremendous. Mick begins questioning his own abilities, and begins questioning whether he is or is not good enough. If he is not good enough, as he secretly worries, he wonders what he can do to make himself even better so that he could be good enough.



Part 3, Chapter 1

Part 3, Chapter 1 Summary

DeShawn and Drew attempt to console Mick, telling him the loss to Foothill wasn't his fault. They believe that Foothill's players are using steroids. Later that day, a rumor circulates that Coach Downs would be quitting. That Thursday, there is an after-school meeting for the football team, which Coach Downs addresses. Coach Downs is quitting to take on a job as offensive coordinator at Pacific Lutheran.

Mr. Carlson, a custodian, will become Downs's replacement. Carlson stresses respect for individuals and teams. He also arranges to bring the team to a 4A championship game in Tacoma. In the library, Mick discovers that Carlson has a stellar record as a coach at Snohomish High School, but quit. After he quit, the team went downhill. This causes Mick to question why Carlson left.

Before Coach Downs leaves, he tells Mick that Mick is fast and swift, but he needs to be stronger.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Analysis

Mick's fears that part of him is not good enough for football is confirmed by Coach Downs. Although Downs tells him that he is fast and swift and can handle the ball well, Downs tells Mick that he needs to be stronger as well. This cements the determination in Mick's mind that he needs to improve, and he needs to improve quickly.



Part 3, Chapter 2

Part 3, Chapter 2 Summary

Mick goes to the 4A Championship at the Tacoma Dome. Pasco, one of the two teams playing, gains the upper hand against Rogers, the other team, early on.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Analysis

In a team outing with Carlson, the new coach, Mick and his teammates go to see the 4A championship game. Early on, Pasco gains the upper hand on Rogers, leading Mick, Drew, DeShawn, and the others to believe that Pasco is going to win the game. As football players, they believe they can accurately predict the results of the game because they believe they know the game.



Part 3, Chapter 3

Part 3, Chapter 3 Summary

Throughout the game, Carlson moves around, sitting here and there and discussing the game with Mick, Drew, and the others. Despite what appears to be happening, Carlson believes that Rogers will win the game.

Carlson's prediction comes true. DeShawn announces to Mick and Drew that Carlson knows what he's talking about.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Analysis

Carlson's predictions that Rogers will win comes true, and this leads Mick and the others to realize that Carlson really knows his stuff about football. It creates an aura of respect and admiration for Carlson early on, which is important to the effectiveness of a team.

Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

Mick turns sixteen over Christmas break and gets his drivers license. His mother lectures him on safety. His father takes him out to learn to drive the jeep. Mick's father also brings him to a firing range to teach him how to use a gun.

Part 3, Chapter 4 Analysis

Mick's increased responsibilities on the football field are matched by his increased responsibilities at home, as both man of the house and as the driver of a car. He takes these responsibilities very seriously, because each of his parents give him safety lessons on handling both the gun and the car.

Part 3, Chapter 5

Part 3, Chapter 5 Summary

Grandpa Leo and Grandma Harriet come to visit for Christmas. After they leave, Micks' father gives Mick the jeep. Mick will have to work for his father to pay for insurance and gas. Mick's father is going to buy a truck. In order to drive, Mick's mother makes him follow a strict set of rules. He picks up DeShawn and Drew, who try to get him to drive across a creek in the jeep, but Mick refuses.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Analysis

Early on, Mick is very responsible about handling his car. He, with mild difficulty, refuses the peer pressure of his friends to take the jeep offroading. He says that he has made a promise to his mother, and intends to keep it by not doing anything reckless. This endears the reader further to Mick, who seems to be handling his responsibilities -both on and off the field- with remarkable care.



Part 3, Chapter 6

Part 3, Chapter 6 Summary

Back at school in January, Mick goes to the gym and begins lifting weights to strengthen up. Carlson has reorganized the gym and has put up motivational posters. Weight equipment is now grouped into stations. Carlson tells them that if they want to end up where Pasco and Rogers did, it is up to them to do it.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Analysis

Carlson knows what he is doing. He leaves the fate of the football team in the hands of the players, telling them that if they want to be where Rogers and Pasco are, it is entirely their choice. Mick and the others clearly want to be as good as Pasco and Rogers so they commit to finding a way to get there.



Part 3, Chapter 7

Part 3, Chapter 7 Summary

That night on television, Mick sees an infomercial about pills that turned weaklings into muscled men. It makes him think about bulking up. Mick goes looking for protein powder and vitamins, but discovers how expensive they are. Mick's father hires Mick to help do work around the house to cover the cost of the protein powder and supplements. Mick begins making and taking protein shakes.

Part 3, Chapter 7 Analysis

Mick begins considering ways that he can get stronger, in order to help bring the team to victory. He decides that working out, taking vitamins, and taking protein powder will give him the extra strength that he needs. It is the right way to do things, and it is a decision that Mick makes on his own. This is especially crucial to his character, because he begins to make his own decisions with respect to football. This will prove telling later.



Part 3, Chapter 8

Part 3, Chapter 8 Summary

As Mike's job begins taking him away from his family, Mike shows Mick where he keeps his gun, just in case. Mick is told never to touch the gun unless he feels threatened. Between the jeep and the gun, Mick realizes he is growing up.

Part 3, Chapter 8 Analysis

In an ominous precursor for later events, Mick's father shows Mick where he keeps his revolver. In a beautiful example of foreshadowing, Mick is told never to touch the gun unless he feels threatened. The question of what constitutes a threat will be revealed much later.



Part 3, Chapter 9

Part 3, Chapter 9 Summary

Everything in Mick's life seems to be in order: school, football, car, work, and protein powder. Mike's job allows him a membership at Popeye's, a weightlifting place. It also allows him to get Mick in for free as well. Mike even arranges for a personal trainer for Mick. He and Drew go to Popeye's and meet Peter Volz, who will be their trainer.

Peter seems gay to Mick and Drew, and both of them decide not to go back to Popeye's. Mick's father is not happy, but doesn't force Mike to go back.

Part 3, Chapter 9 Analysis

At the suggestion of his father, Mick tries going to a personal training session at Popeye's, a gym where his father gets a free membership. This is the first encounter with weights that Mick has outside of school, and it too -like the appearance of the revolver- has an ominous feeling about it.



Part 3, Chapter 10

Part 3, Chapter 10 Summary

A few weeks later, Nolan Brown, a junior tackle and a friend of Drager, starts harassing Mick, saying everything gets handed to Mick, from his car to his position on the team. Mick asks whether or not it's because he's simply better than Drager.

The next day, Drager attempts to rile Mick up, but Mr. Chavez, the vice principal, intervenes. Chavez tells Mick that if Drager gives him any more trouble, to come to him rather than trying to fight Drager.

Part 3, Chapter 10 Analysis

A near-confrontation with Drager -a third omen in addition to the gun and the gym- has nearly disastrous consequences for Mick, until the vice principal intercedes. The appearance of deliberately-provoking antagonists adds another degree of pressure to Mick's life.



Part 3, Chapter 11

Part 3, Chapter 11 Summary

Drager shows up at the weight gym after Carlson leaves, and taunts Mick to bench press 180 pounds. Mick manages to do it a few times. Drager does it twenty times. Drager gets in Mick's face, and Mick swings at Drager, but Drager ducks. Drager and his friend Clark then beat up Mick, and leave.

Mick is incensed that nobody came to his aid, but Drew apologizes and promises to have Mick's back in the future. Mick pretends to be sick to stay home from school to let his stomach heal. Back at school, Kaylee Sullivan seeks out Mick and says it that it is horrible what happened to him. The reason why Drager and Clark beat Mick up is because it was their last day, and they knew they could get away with it.

Mick continues working out harder than ever. He feels distance between himself and his friends because of what happened.

Part 3, Chapter 11 Analysis

Mick feels as if he is alone, for Drew, DeShawn, and the other members of the team abandoned him in his time of need. He realizes that not only is he going to have to do harder at football, but that he is going to have to look out for himself completely. This is the fourth omen in a series of omens that will ultimately compel Mick into decision-making.



Part 3, Chapter 12

Part 3, Chapter 12 Summary

Mick continues lifting weights, but he isn't satisfied with his progress and he decides to go back to the gym to work out with Peter Volz.

Coach Carlson meets with Mick and tells him that nothing in life is ever simple. He asks Mick to reconsider working out at Popeye's, because the bond formed between teammates is important. This stings Mick, who feels like DeShawn and Drew should have come to his side when Drager beat him up. He tells DeShawn and Drew that he can no longer give them a ride home because he will be working out at Popeye's.

Part 3, Chapter 12 Analysis

Carlson wants Mick to focus on working out at the gym to build up a sense of brotherhood with his teammates. But Mick -thinking about how none of his teammates (or his friends) had his back, and how he wants to be stronger- declines, deciding that he will indeed go to work out at Popeye's. This also serves as a point of departure for Mick, who heads away from the wisdom and advice of Carlson, who understands football inside and out.



Part 3, Chapter 13

Part 3, Chapter 13 Summary

Mick goes back to Popeye's and meets up with Peter Volz. They got next door to Jamba Juice before the workout to get a smoothie. There, he takes out his wallet to show Mick a picture of his girlfriend to confirm that he isn't gay. Mick explains all of his reasons to Peter for wanting to be a football player, for wanting to get stronger. Peter seems like an older brother to Mick.

They they go to work out. It is the best workout that Mick remembers ever doing. Afterward, Peter tells Mick that he can get Mick steroids if he wants, but Mick says he won't use them. Peter says that it is alright.

Part 3, Chapter 13 Analysis

Mick's second encounter with Peter is a lot better than the first. He begins to view Peter as something of an older brother, and a bond of trust begins between the two of them. Peter mentions to Mick that he can get Mick steroids, but Mick declines -his sense of responsibility is still readily apparent to the reader.



Part 3, Chapter 14

Part 3, Chapter 14 Summary

Things get busy for Mick. His high school switches over to an online grading system, so his mother checks his grades frequently. Mick can't afford to let his grades slip. He also continues working out with Peter as much as he can. Spring football rolls around, and Carlson shakes up the program. Carlson doesn't care about what grade someone is in; if the player is good, the player will play. This increases stress on Mick who has to contend with a large eighth grader named Dave Kane.

After the scrimmage games, Mick begins to worry that he will lose his position to Kane.

Part 3, Chapter 14 Analysis

Stress and pressure increase on Mick. He has to double up for his grades and for football. Unlike the past, where Mick had the solace of knowing that freshmen couldn't be starters, this year he understands that he could be replaced by a freshman. Mick understands the gravity of the situation, and realizes that he could very easily lose his position to Kane if he doesn't shape up fast.



Part 4, Chapter 1

Part 4, Chapter 1 Summary

Mick goes to see Peter at Popeye's to ask him about Dianabol, called D-Bol or steroids. For twenty dollars more a month, Peter can hook Mick up with steroids, but he cautions Mick to limit his use and how long he uses it for. He also tells Mick that there could be side effects, such as growing breasts. But if these changes occur, he tells Mick to stop taking the steroids, and to take other pills which will clean out his system. Once Mick's system is cleaned out, he can go back on the steroids. He also warns Mick that he might have emotional consequences, such as anger or severe depression. He tells Mick to take four pills a day, and changes should begin in four or five days.

Part 4, Chapter 1 Analysis

Despite the consequences of steroids, Mick decides to start buying them from Peter and taking them in order to gain an edge over the others. Those consequences include physical changes and emotional mood swings, but Mick decides to risk these possibilities in order to secure his position in football. Mick's decision to continue at Popeye's -against the wishes of Carlson- has already secured Mick a place of tragedy at an unknown future date.



Part 4, Chapter 2

Part 4, Chapter 2 Summary

By Thursday, the steroids kick in, and Mick is able to lift and work out much easier. Peter also arranges for a more intensive workout.

Part 4, Chapter 2 Analysis

The steroids begin working for Mick, who is able to workout longer and harder. His initial use of the drug is beneficial, and he is committed to using them until the football season. But the side effects are coming.

Part 4, Chapter 3

Part 4, Chapter 3 Summary

Russ Diver is a likable kid and is the class clown. But as the school year ends, Mick finds that likes Russ less and less. On the second to last day of school, Russ accidentally bumps into Mick, who slams him against a locker and makes him cry. Drew intervenes and stops Mick by telling him that getting suspended would be like throwing away his position to Kane.

Part 4, Chapter 3 Analysis

Rage brought on by steroid use takes hold of Mick, who slams a friend into a locker and forces him to cry. This causes Mick to realize just how tentative his hold on his normal self is with the addition of the steroids. Drew fortunately intervenes, and reminds Mick that his position is also tentative. The reader sees that Mick might not be able to handle things after all.



Part 4, Chapter 4

Part 4, Chapter 4 Summary

Mick reflects on the incident with Russ as his first encounter with 'roid rage. Mick reflects on how the feeling never quite left him, that he was always slightly angry.

Mick continues taking steroids, getting bigger and bigger, and doesn't bother hanging out with Drew or DeShawn. He explains to his mother that he is doing exactly what he wants to do: working out, working for money, and enjoying his evenings.

Part 4, Chapter 4 Analysis

The reader has more evidence that Mick's rage will be dangerous, because Mick confesses that a small amount of anger always wells up inside him. As the summer proceeds, Mick continues shutting out his friends and his social life -exactly what Coach Carlson advised him not to do.



Part 4, Chapter 5

Part 4, Chapter 5 Summary

Acne breaks out on Mick's body and face from the steroids. In July, Mick notices that his chest is growing, so he tells Peter who gives him pills to clean out his system. But Mick doesn't understand how Peter can keep going the way he does without having to stop taking drugs. Peter explains he does injections of a combination of drugs instead of using steroids. But Mick is convinced he doesn't want to do injections.

Part 4, Chapter 5 Analysis

Physical side effects of steroid use continues, from horrible acne to the swelling of Micks' chest. He doesn't like the side effects. Peter tells him about how he uses stack injections instead of steroid pills, but Mick says he is against injections. The reader, in turn, doubts Mick's sincerity because Mick -who was once so responsible he wouldn't take his jeep off the road- is becoming less and less responsible as time goes on, between taking steroids and ignoring the coaching advice of Carlson. Piece by piece, Mick's life is fraying at the edges.



Part 4, Chapter 6

Part 4, Chapter 6 Summary

Mick is unhappy he will have to stop taking steroids to clean out his system. He walks around town, feeling rage coming on. He feels as if his body is too weak. Later he gets a call from Drew, asking if Mick wants to play volleyball with him, DeShawn, Kaylee, and Kaylee's friends Natalie and Heather. Mick agrees.

Kaylee shows Mick how to play, and decides he wants to come back again to play.

Part 4, Chapter 6 Analysis

Mick is given a reprieve during his steroid cleansing by Drew, who invites him to play volleyball with Kaylee and some other friends. Drew agrees to go, and discovers how much he has been missing by letting his life revolve around football. It appears to the reader as if Mick might enjoy his return to a social life enough to do away with steroids and his football obsession, yet the reader understands that this might not be enough.



Part 4, Chapter 7

Part 4, Chapter 7 Summary

Mick enjoys spending time with Kaylee, and taking walks with her around the lake. One day they decide to go swimming, and Mick is self-conscious because while his chest has returned to normal for the most part, his acne hasn't completely gone. He races into the water so nobody can see him. When they get out, they see how much acne is on Mick's chest, and they see his chest is puffy.

He leaves a few moments later, goes driving until dark, and then goes home.

Part 4, Chapter 7 Analysis

Mick is humiliated when his friends see his chest and his acne, and so he goes driving around for hours. Here, Mick is presented with another opportunity -and another reason- to stop taking steroids altogether. The humiliation he suffers is a far cry from the humiliation he will suffer if his use of steroids is discovered. It is as if Mick is being offered a second chance.



Part 4, Chapter 8

Part 4, Chapter 8 Summary

That Sunday, Mick and his father go with his mother to Mars Hill Church, a new church she has found. After the service, Mick sees Russ and goes to talk to him. He apologizes for what happened in school.

Drew invites Mick to the lake later that day, and Mick resolves to stop taking steroids so he is no longer humiliated. He drives toward the lake but then decides he does not want to go because he does not want to stop taking steroids, and be a nobody.

Part 4, Chapter 8 Analysis

The second chance that Mick is offered also coincides with attending church. Between attending church and apologizing to Russ, the reader has hope that Mick might indeed take the second chance he has been afforded, but this will not be so. Instead of continuing to move further along in his social life, and move away from use of steroids, Mick opts to return to steroids because he doesn't want to be a nobody -despite the fact that he does have friends, and a girl who is interested in him.

Part 4, Chapter 9

Part 4, Chapter 9 Summary

Mick goes to the gym and tells Peter he wants to do a stack -an injection like Peter does. Peter says the injections are safer than the steroids. Stack injections will cost fifteen dollars a day. Peter shows Mick how to clean needles, how to load a needle, and how to use a needle. He gives Mick his first injection, and also advises Mick on taking other pills too.

Drew calls to see if Mick will still come to the lake, and mentions that Kaylee misses him. But Drew refuses, saying he has to work at the house as well as go to Popeye's.

Taking the stacks makes Mick feel better and gives him a rush.

Part 4, Chapter 9 Analysis

Mick decides he'd rather take stack injections than steroids in order to avoid the physical side-effects of steroids. He believes that this will help improve his physical image, and it will also allow him to more easily handle social situations, such as swimming. Mick has thrown his second chance out the window.



Part 4, Chapter 10

Part 4, Chapter 10 Summary

The day before tryouts, depression hits Mick. He feels as if everything is pointless, and feels like he has no friends and has lost Kaylee. But his father brings Mick out back to throw the ball around, and it helps make him feel better almost completely.

At tryouts, Carlson and the other coaches notices Mick's fast sprinting and compliment him on it.

Part 4, Chapter 10 Analysis

A bout of depression descends upon Mick, who feels as if life is worthless and everything is pointless. He needs a social outlet, and his father just happens to provide it. In reality, the depression Mick suffers could be alleviated by expanded his social life, but he refuses to do this. Football is valued above everything else. At tryouts, the use of the drugs shows as Mick is able to sprint faster and longer.



Gym Candy

Summary

During scrimmages, Mick runs through different kids, and the coaches are impressed. Mick's teammates, including Drew and DeShawn, are also impressed.

Afterward, Mick feels the adrenaline rushing through him, so he takes the jeep off the road and drives through a creek, speeding as he goes.

Analysis

Mick's continued devolution of responsibility passes a mile mark when he takes the jeep offroading at his own decision (as opposed to being pressured previously) and in so doing defies his mother's rules. This act of reckless behavior is an extension of Mick's reckless behavior with his use of performance enhancing drugs. The adrenaline rushing through his system -something uncontrollable- is symbolic of Mick's life, which appears to be uncontrollable as well as he continues taking drugs.



Part 4, Chapter 12

Part 4, Chapter 12 Summary

Mick goes to see Peter at the gym, telling Peter that now that the season is about to start, he wants to stop doing stacks. But Peter asks why he would stop doing them. Mick doesn't feel like explaining that he feels like a cheater. He compares himself to former drug addicts who turned their lives around. Now Mick wants to do the same.

Part 4, Chapter 12 Analysis

With the season approaching, with embarrassment mounting, and with pressure increasing, Mick decides he doesn't want to take any drugs anymore. Here, Mick has a third chance to finally divest himself of drug use, and initially, he takes the opportunity to do so.



Part 5, Chapter 1

Part 5, Chapter 1 Summary

The first game of the season is against the Franklin Quakers. Carlson's plan is to simply drive at the defense and outdo them. Carlson also cautions his players to be good sportsmen. During the game, Mick is able to score several touchdowns.

Afterward, Carlson explains that Mick was only able to score so much because Franklin's line was horrible. At home that night, Mick wonders how much of the steroids are still in his system, and how much of what he accomplished earlier were due to him, and due to the steroids.

Part 5, Chapter 1 Analysis

Even though the first game of the season is a victory, Carlson makes sure Mick knows that the only reason the team won is because Franklin's line was horrible. This leads Mick to wonder how much of his performance was him, and how much of it was the drugs. He begins having second doubts about deciding to stop taking the drugs.



Part 5, Chapter 2

Part 5, Chapter 2 Summary

Mick makes the papers for his game and sees that he has shattered a record. In school on Monday, everyone -including Kaylee -is congratulating him. Natalie meets up with Mick and asks him to come to the volleyball game to support Kaylee. Mick agrees.

At Popeye's, Mick's workouts are changed to accommodate the lack of steroids and his football schedule. Peter offers Mick new drugs, but Mick says he isn't interested, though secretly he is. He misses Kaylee's game and ends up having a bout of depression.

Part 5, Chapter 2 Analysis

The victory celebration for the first game puts Mick in the spotlight, and he loves it. He pretends he is an NFL star. His social life has a chance to expand when Kaylee asks Mick to attend his game through Natalie.

Peter offers Mick new drugs, but Mick declines them because he is determined to win without them. Yet Mick misses Kaylee's volleyball game, and suffers from even more depression. He is indeed addicted to the drugs, though he is in denial about it.



Part 5, Chapter 3

Part 5, Chapter 3 Summary

Mick continues his workouts at Popeye's, begging Peter to keep helping him work out like before, but Peter offers to find him another trainer if he wants because he won't do it. Mick accepts Peter's warnings so Peter can keep training him.

Shilshole plays Garfield that weekend. At first Shilshole is down, but a break for the end zone by Mick turns the tide of the game. The story in the paper the next day credits Mick with being the difference.

Part 5, Chapter 3 Analysis

Despite Mick playing without drugs, he manages to do well enough, though the celebrations for the victory aren't as large as the week before. Yet Mick appears to be doing well without the drugs, giving the reader second pause to consider whether or not Mick is truly finished with performance enhancers.



Part 5, Chapter 4

Part 5, Chapter 4 Summary

While Mick is congratulated at school, it isn't the same as the week before. Mr. Stimes, the trainer, asks to see Mick in his office. He tells Mick that he's noticed he's faster, stronger, larger, and heavier. He asks about Mick's training at Popeye's. He pointedly asks Mick if he is on steroids. Mick denies it, which is a half-truth because he doesn't use them anymore.

Mr. Stimes asks for the name of Mick's trainer and Mick only reveals Peter's first name, pretending he forgot the last name.

Part 5, Chapter 4 Analysis

The physical changes in Mick over the summer are also noticed by Mr. Stimes, the team's trainer. He directly asks Mick if Mick is using steroids, but Mick denies this. Scared that his tracks might be uncovered, Mick becomes nervous and will not give Stimes Peter's last name. Not only are there physical and emotional effects, but there are mental effects from steroid use now as well. Mick is lying more and more to cover up his use of steroids and stack injections.



Part 5, Chapter 5

Part 5, Chapter 5 Summary

When he leaves Stimes's office, Mick races for Popeye's to find Peter, who isn't there. When he does show up, Mick explains the situation. Peter is a little concerned, but he knows it is illegal to test high school students for drugs. Peter tells Mick that Mick had better not say anything. When he gets home, Mick eats dinner. Afterward, his mother tells him how proud she is of him.

Drew meets up with Mick and talks to him, thinking Mick is afraid of his acne which is why he doesn't want to go swimming. Drew reminds Mick about Heather's pool party the following week. Mick realizes Drew is his only real friend.

Part 5, Chapter 5 Analysis

Peter and Mick work to cover their bases and Drew believes that Mick has been avoiding him and Kaylee because of his acne. When Mick stops to think about everything going on, he realizes that Drew is his only real friend. The reader learns in this chapter that it isn't only the edges of Mick's life that is fraying; his entire life is beginning to unravel.



Part 5, Chapter 6

Part 5, Chapter 6 Summary

The next three games are against the weakest teams in the league, and Carlson cuts back on Mick's playing time to give him a rest. Mick's father agrees with the decision. Although Mick makes good plays, he doesn't feel as if he is good enough. He begins doing everything he can think of to prepare for games, from conserving energy to focusing on stretching.

Mick heads to Heather's birthday party. As he drives there, he sinks into depression, wondering if anything is worth it, and wondering if he is good enough. Instead of going to the party, Mick simply drives around.

Part 5, Chapter 6 Analysis

Mick attempts to prepare himself for the games using every method he can think of that does not involve the use of performance enhancing drugs. But depression brought on by use of those drugs -in coordination with withdrawal- causes him to reconsider his social life and reconsider not taking the drugs. He questions himself and how good he is, and the reader suspects that Mick will again fall into drug use.



Part 5, Chapter 7

Part 5, Chapter 7 Summary

Carlson decides to give Mick and Kane equal playing time to see who comes out on top. Carlson says Kane has earned his chance. Mick understands, but he is furious. Mick knows he has to come out on top, so he goes to buy the new drugs -an amphetamine steroid mix- from Peter.

In the game against Woodinville, Mick doesn't have a chance to inject himself. On the field, Drew tells Mick he'll be fine. Mick runs back into the locker room, citing an excuse about his stomach, and gets the drug mix -XTR- from his bag. He injects himself with XTR, and returns to the game. Mick drives relentlessly at Woodinville's defense, and in the third quarter, cracks it. They win the game.

Afterward, Mick is still so wound up he can't sleep, so he goes for a drive to Golden Gardens Park, where he stares at the water long into the night.

Part 5, Chapter 7 Analysis

Everywhere, pressure increase on Mick, especially on the football field as he now finds he has to compete with Kane for playing time. Merit is everything, ironically. Mick ultimately returns to drugs, this time using a new injection called XTR. He has fallen back into drug use, and the XTR is an even more potent drug than the stack injections, which is patently dangerous for Mick.

Part 5, Chapter 8

Part 5, Chapter 8 Summary

One day, Mick forgets an elbow brace on the field, and leaves the locker room to get it. When he comes back, Mick finds Drew looking through his bag for tape. Mick quickly grabs the bag away, and gives Drew the tape. Mick is afraid that Drew could find the needle kit.

Part 5, Chapter 8 Analysis

Mick's paranoia sets in as he discovers Drew rooting through his bag. Mick's secret is nearly revealed not just to Drew, but to the entire locker room. Drew begins to grow suspicious of Mick, who seems increasingly and unnecessarily defensive. Mick's life is coming further unraveled.



Part 5, Chapter 9

Part 5, Chapter 9 Summary

From time to time, Mick believes that Drew and Coach Stimes are on to his use of drugs, but he decides he is just being silly. Before game seven against Liberty High, Mick injects himself and has a bout of overexcitedness. Mick tries to ease up during the game, but a fumble is caught by an opposing player whom Mick has already beaten twice before. Mick goes into a rage and tackles him, and the referee calls a personal foul and Mick is ejected from the game.

He is humiliated that night, and his father warns him not to do it again.

Part 5, Chapter 9 Analysis

Anger brought on from the drugs causes Mick to tackle an opposing player, resulting not only in a personal foul but ejection from the game. This is the first time that Mick's drug-induced anger has spilled over into real physical violence, and does not bode well for the future. While Mick traces the anger to his drugs, it is not enough to convince him to stop using the XTR.

Part 5, Chapter 10

Part 5, Chapter 10 Summary

Monday morning, Mick meets with Coach Carlson who tells Mick that he does not like cheap shots. He suspends Mick from the team for one week.

Instead of telling his parents about his suspension, Mick lies and tells them he is sitting out because of an injured ankle.

Part 5, Chapter 10 Analysis

Mick, who had once determined that he would be everything his father wasn't, is repeated his father's life, from fighting with other players to violence to use of an illegal substance. Insult is added to injury when Mick lies about his suspension, blaming it on an injured ankle -just like his father blamed his career failure on an injured ankle.



Part 5, Chapter 11

Part 5, Chapter 11 Summary

Mick watches the next game from the top of the stadium. Mick is ashamed that he cannot play with his team. The team barely wins, and Mick knows the next team they play is Foothill.

Part 5, Chapter 11 Analysis

Mick spends the next game watching from the stands. His heart is on the field, but he is not. Because of his decisions, he is forced to watch from the bleachers and from the crowd. Mick knows down on the field that his teammates are barely scraping by, and that the next game with Foothill will be the determining factor for the championships.



Part 5, Chapter 12

Part 5, Chapter 12 Summary

Mick decides not to take XTR in the coming game. Carlson calls Mick to his office. He puts Mick on second string to make sure he can keep his cool.

His father asks if Mick will be starting on Friday night; Mick says he doesn't know. Mike explains that his boss doesn't mind him taking off when Mick plays, but if Mick doesn't play, Mike has to work. Mick tells his father that he is going to play.

Part 5, Chapter 12 Analysis

After contemplating things in his mind, Mick decides not to take the XTR for the Foothill game. Carlson's warning about keeping his anger under control is further reason not to take the drugs. Mick knows that not only does the game depend on him, but so does his future career depend upon his ability to control his anger.



Part 5, Chapter 13

Part 5, Chapter 13 Summary

Before the game, Mick and his father toss the ball around. Mick doesn't have a chance to remove his needle kit. Everything in the season is riding on the game against Foothill. Mick decides he has to take XTR in order to perform well, and so he takes his bag and heads to the bathroom. Drew confronts him there and asks why he is bringing his bag into the bathroom. But the coaches call for the team, and Mick shoves his bag in a bathroom stall and races out with the other players.

Part 5, Chapter 13 Analysis

Drew's suspicion continues as Drew questions why Mick is bringing his bag into the bathroom stalls before the game. This unnerves Mick, who decided to take the XTR but was unable to because Drew confronted him. In so doing, Drew destroys Mick's ability to take the XTR.



Part 5, Chapter 14

Part 5, Chapter 14 Summary

Mick is eager to play, but he realizes he isn't starting. Shilshole starts out behind Foothill, and Carlson sends Mick in. After a hard-fought game, Mick leads his team to victory.

Part 5, Chapter 14 Analysis

Without the drugs, Mick is able to help his team secure a victory against Foothill. In the end, Mick -on his own without the injection- was in fact good enough to win the game. This confirms to the reader and to Mick that even Foothill could be defeated without Mick using the drugs and that Mick truly does not need them.

Part 5, Chapter 15

Part 5, Chapter 15 Summary

The team is exhausted back in the locker room. They go out afterward to get pizza. During the celebration, Mick notices Drew does not look happy.

At home, Mick searches for his XTR kit in his bag, but cannot find it. Drew calls Mick.

Part 5, Chapter 15 Analysis

Drew, who Mick considered to be his one true friend is the harbinger for Drew's downfall as well -not because Drew has a vendetta against Mick, but because Drew believed in Mick. The reader realizes by the end of chapter 61 that Drew knows something.



Part 5, Chapter 6

Part 5, Chapter 6 Summary

Drew and Mick meet up. Drew is horrified at Mick, telling Mick that he cheated, that the entire team deserves nothing because Mick cheated. Drew tells Mick that he is going to Carlson, that Carlson will know what to do.

That is when Mick pulls out a revolver and shoots himself.

Part 5, Chapter 6 Analysis

Drew's paranoia, his drugs, and his lack of a moral compass all conspire together to make him feel threatened -and this threat means he has secured his father's gun. The omen of the gun -of feeling threatened- comes to the fore as Mick attempts to commit suicide.

Mick's downfall is poignant because it tells in terms of selfishness. Mick is never concerned about his teammates after he begins playing: he is only concerned about himself, about his records, about his touchdowns. This self-obsession causes him not just to hurt himself, but to hurt the entire team in the process because their winning season has been predicated upon him, and Mick is a cheater.



Epilogue, Chapter 1

Epilogue, Chapter 1 Summary

Mick misfires, and only grazes his head. Drew rushes him to the hospital, and when Mick wakes up, his parents are there. His parents tell them he will get through things. They do not talk about what Mick did, and they do not talk about what will happen. A police officer comes to question Mick, and tells him that Peter Volz has been arrested.

Epilogue, Chapter 1 Analysis

Mick's suicide attempt leads his one true friend Drew to save his life by bringing him to the hospital. Mick's life has completely spiraled out of control, and had it not been for his own stupidity in trying to shoot himself, he would not be alive. Had it not been for Drew, Mick would not be alive either. Mick's parents -his family- and his one true friend, have brought Mick back from the brink.



Epilogue, Chapter 2

Epilogue, Chapter 2 Summary

Mick goes to a rehabilitation center. There, he meets his counselor, Mr. Riley. Mick's mother leaves him a Bible and he accepts it.

Epilogue, Chapter 2 Analysis

For the first time in the book, Mick is given a chance to find a moral compass when his mother leaves him a Bible. He shows a willingness for spiritual change by agreeing to accept the Bible. Not only does Mick's soul need cleansing, but so does his body. He is therefore transferred to a rehabilitation center, where he will spend three weeks.



Epilogue, Chapter 3

Epilogue, Chapter 3 Summary

Mick is recovering and recounts his stay at the rehab center. Riley tells Mick he has to realize the truth, and live the truth; and Mick realizes the truth is that nobody forced him to do steroids except himself. Mick wants to go back to playing football if he can, and be with his teammates, not sneak off to the bathrooms to inject himself with XTR. Mick also reads the Bible.

But when the book ends, he is not cured of his addiction. He willingly says that he could go to Popeye's, or any gym, and easily get the drugs again.

Epilogue, Chapter 3 Analysis

The end of the book is not happy. Although Mick has the help he needs at the center, his own mind revolves around the possibility that he could very easily obtain the drugs he once used again. All he has to do is go to a gym, and the temptation will be there. It serves to reinforce the adage that an addict will always be an addict.



Characters

Mick Johnson

The protagonist and narrator of the book, Mick Johnson is the son of Mike Johnson, a former college star and NFL player. From an early age, Mick loves football because his father introduces him to the sport, and because he wants to exceed his father's near-mythical status as a football player. As Mick gets older, all he wants to do is to play football. His life revolves around it. In order to give Mick an edge over the other future football players, his father Mike keeps him out of school one year longer, making him begin kindergarten one year later.

In high school as a freshman, Mick makes it onto the second string of the varsity team, and becomes special teams captain. But spurred on by his father and by his own desire, Mick wants to be able to start games. When Mick's first string position holder is kicked off the team for drinking, Mick becomes a starter and finishes out the season. He is very proud of his accomplishments, but his coach tells him he needs to be stronger.

Mick hits the gym, tries protein powder and vitamins, but is unhappy with his progress, so his father recommends he try Popeye's gym. There, Mick's trainer Peter introduces Mick to steroids, which Mick begins taking. The steroids give him bad acne and cause his chest to swell, so Mick moves on to taking stack injections from Peter, who also acts as his supplier. As time goes on, and Mick faces more pressure from school and football, he decides to continue taking the injections through tryouts and into the game season. But periodic bursts of rage and depression threaten to undermine his career. Mick moves on to taking an even harder performance drug called XTR.

After the championship game against Foothill, Mick's closest friend and fellow football player, Drew, discovers his drug use and confronts him. In a panic, Mick attempts to commit suicide and fails. He spends the next three weeks and the epilogue of the book in a rehab center.

Mike Johnson

Mike Johnson is the father of Mick Johnson, and is a former college star and NFL player. He introduces Mick to football at an early age, and pressures Mick to always do better. He teaches Mick the ins and outs of the game, and suggests Mick head to Popeye's to increase his strength. Mike's legendary status in Mick's mind is crushed when Mick discovers he was thrown out of the NFL for ruining his career by drinking, fighting, and acting with arrogance. Mike has high hopes that his son will be better than he was, and does everything he can along the way to help Mick and to steer him in the right direction.

When Mike discovers his son has attempted suicide over use of performance-enhancing drugs, he is horrified but supportive, knowing his son needs help.



Mick's Mother

Though she is never named, Mick's mother is the sole spiritual and moral force in Mick's life, attempting to get him to read the Bible and go to church. She is understanding, sweet, and kind, but seems to be largely absent from Mick's life. This is because Mike, her husband, occupies the dominant place in Mick's life. After Mick attempts suicide, Mick's mother leaves him the Bible to read and tells him that he will get through everything.

Drew Carney

Drew Carney is Mick Johnson's closest friend and a fellow football player. Drew discovers that Mick has been using performance-enhancing drugs, and confronts him about it. When Mick attempts suicide, Drew rushes him to the emergency room and in so doing, saves his life.

DaShawn Free

DeShawn Free is Mick's second closest friend and a fellow football player.

Matt Drager

Matt Drager is the first string running back who is suspended from the team for drinking. Matt later beats up Mick when Mick says he is better than Drager.

Kaylee Sullivan

Kaylee is a beautiful volleyball player who has a crush on Mick. She repeatedly tries to get Mick to hang out or to see her games, but to no avail.

Coach Downs

Coach Downs is the retiring football coach for Shilshole High School. He refuses to allow freshman to be starters on his team, which relegates Mick to second string. Downs makes Mick special teams captain for all of his hard work and effort.

Coach Carlson

Coach Carlson is Shilshole High's former custodian and new football coach. He is very intelligent, understands football well, and is a strict and fair player. He suspends Mick for one week for being ejected from a football game for a personal foul.



Coach Stimes

The trainer of Shilshole High's football team, Coach Stimes is the first to notice Mick's rapid weight gain and speed increases. He directly asks Mick if Mick is taking steroids, which Mick denies. He also asks about Mick's training program, and asks for the name of Mick's trainer.

Peter Volz

A trainer who works at Popeye's Gym, Peter serves as an older brother to Mick. He uses this trust between them to introduce Mick to steroids, stack injections, and XTR. He serves as Mick's personal trainer and middle-man for the drugs, selling them to Mick. Peter himself is a frequent user of stack injections, and he is large and well-muscled. After Mick nearly commits suicide, Peter is arrested by the police for his involvement in the sale of the drugs.



Objects/Places

Shilshole High School

Located in Seattle Washington, Shilshole High School is the school where Mick, Drew, and DeShawn attend and play football. It is also where Coach Downs and Coach Carlson teach and play football.

Seattle

Seattle, Washington, is the home of Mick Johnson and his family, and the location of Shilshole High School. It is also the general setting of the book.

Popeye's Gym

Through his job, Mike Johnson gets free passes to Popeye's gym where he encourages Mick to keep working out. It is at Popeye's where Mick meets his personal trainer, Peter, who hooks Mick up with performance-enhancing drugs.

Steroids

Steroids are the first performance-enhancing drugs that Mick uses. They cause him to break out in acne and grow breasts. Mick later decides he no longer wants to use steroids, mostly because of the physical side effects and so he moves on to heavier drugs.

Stack Injections

Stack injections are a combination of various performance enhancing drugs taken by needle through the arm. Peter Volz uses them regularly, and introduces Mick to them. Mick then himself uses stack injections, injecting himself before playing in games. They cause serious bouts of depression, and they also cause boundless energy. Mick ultimately abandons them in favor of harder performance enhancers.

XTR

XTR is the new drug that Peter Volz tells Mick about. XTR is taken by injection like stacks, and causes even greater highs and lows before and after games. Mick begins using XTR, and the rush he feels from them is too much to handle at times, as he becomes nervous and jumpy. They also add to Mick's paranoia and fear of being found out.



Needle Kit

Mick's needle kit contains a syringe, rubbing alcohol, cotton swabs, and the drugs that Mick injects into his arm. He keeps the kit in his duffel bag, and injects himself before games while hiding in the bathroom stalls. Drew ultimately finds the needle kit and confronts Mick about it.

Revolver

When Mick turns sixteen, his father teaches him how to shoot a gun and then shows Mick where he keeps his revolver. He tells Mick never to touch the gun unless he feels threatened. When Mick feels threatened that he will be found out by Drew, he pulls out the gun on Drew and then shoots himself instead, attempting to commit suicide.

Newspapers

Newspapers are a source of pride and honor to both Mick and Mike Johnson. The newspapers contain articles about the careers of Mick and Mike, and they are framed and hung up on the wall to be admired and celebrated.

Bible

The Johnson family Bible, which sits unread except by Mick's mother, is given to Mick by his mother when Mick enters the rehabilitation center following his suicide attempt. Mick refuses to read the Bible at first, but then begins reading it, hoping to find some measure of consolation because of it. He in particular reads it in the evenings and at night, when his withdrawal is worst.

Themes

Substance Abuse

Carl Deuker's novel "Gym Candy" focuses around the rise and fall of high school football star Mick Johnson. The dominant and overarching theme that guides the entire work is substance abuse. In Mick's case, the substances are performance enhancers.

Mick is aspiring to hold onto his starting spot on the football team at Shilshole High, and he wants to live up to and surpass his father's example as a football star. Between his social life, workouts, football, and schoolwork, the pressure on Mick is tremendous, and he knows he needs to keep his edge in football. Mick therefore goes to work out at Popeye's Gym, where he meets his personal trainer, Peter Volz.

Peter Volz introduces Mick to steroids and Mick reluctantly begins using them in order to keep his position through tryouts. They allow him to become stronger and bigger, but they also have serious negative side effects as well. 'Roid rage fast becomes apparent, where one day in school, Mick slams friend and class clown Russ Diver up against the lockers for accidentally bumping into him. Additionally, the use of steroids includes severe acne and growing breasts.

Mick is anxious to avoid those physical side effects and so he presses Peter for stack injections, which Peter also uses. Peter teaches Mick how to use a needle and inject himself. But the stack injections also include the emotional side effects of serious bouts of depression. Mick moves on to an even newer drug called XTR, also taken by injection, because he is obsessed with keeping his edge on the field. Paranoia also sets in, and Mick begins to feel threatened that the coaches or Drew are on to him. When Drew finally confronts Mick, his dependency on the performance enhancing injections has made him so paranoid that he attempts suicide.

Although Peter says that the drugs are not addicting, they clearly are. Mick must stay in a rehabilitation center for three weeks following his release from the hospital. By the end of the book, Mick is completely aware his is not cured.

Downfall

Carl Deuker's novel "Gym Candy" also explores the theme of downfall. Mick, who aspires to be an even better football hero than his father, will stop at almost nothing to keep his edge on the football field. Mick's father, Mike, was like Mick. Mike was a college star and an NFL player, but was booted over arrests for drunk driving, fighting with his teammates, and skipping practices and team meetings. Mike's downfall was his own arrogance and cockiness.

Mick is determined not to repeat his father's mistakes. He wants to do things the right way, and he wants to be wildly successful in football. He loves football because of the



hard work involved. Step by step, Mick begins making a name for himself as a hard worker, as a dedicated player, and as a good sportsman. He is made captain of special teams and secures a ranking on the second string of players. But this is not enough for Mike, who pushes Mick even harder.

Over the following summer, Mick begins using steroids to gain weight and become stronger and later begins taking injections of XTR in order to make himself better on the field. The drugs do work, but their side effects cannot be ignored forever. Everything from acne to growing breasts to rage to paranoia begin setting in on Mick, who becomes physically dependent on the drugs to play. His trajectory toward glory -which he reaps following his successes on the field- are destroyed by his decision to use drugs. Mick is driven so far to the edge by his paranoia -and from the impending consequences of his use of drugs- that he attempts to commit suicide, and in so doing not only destroys his own football career, but makes his team's season worthless because he cheated.

Failure of Fathers

The failure of fathers is an underlying theme in Carl Deuker's novel "Gym Candy". The failure of fathers in the novel occurs in two ways.

The first way that Mick's father fails Mick is by allowing his son to believe he is a legendary figure in football. Mick idolizes his father and is enamored with the football paraphernalia, framed newspaper articles, and awards that line the basement wall of the Johnson family home. He aspires to be just like his father, to be a football star. According to Mike, his football career ends because of an ankle injury. But Mick later discovers the truth about his father by searching for news about him online.

Mike Johnson was in truth not done in by an ankle injury, but by arrogance. He got into fights with teammates, did not show up for meetings, and was arrested for drunk driving. He was a liability, and he was let go of. Mick's father fails himself in the process, and demonstrates himself as a professional failure to his son.

Mick's father fails him not just because of a lie about his past, but because he does not act as a real moral guide toward Mick in his life. Use of guns, sportsmanship on the field, teaching him how to drive, and achievement are the guiding principles and practices which Mike instills into his son. Reference to God, to morality, to real values off the field -these are never prevalent in Mick's upbringing. His mother attempts to expose Mick to these values, but Mike is the dominant figure in Mick's life, not his mother. Because Mike occupies the dominant part in Mick's life, he is also responsible for instilling values into his son, not just the motivation to do better. Since Mick's father does not serve as a moral compass, which would help steer Mick away from use of performance enhancers, he fails his son.



Style

Point of View

Carl Deuker's novel "Gym Candy" is told in the first-person perspective from the point of view of the main character Mick Johnson. Everything is told through Mick's eyes and from Mick's perspective, as he recounts it from a rehabilitation center where he ultimately ends up by the end of the book.

This is done for primarily two reasons. The novel details Mick's experiences with the use of performance-enhancing drugs. In order to draw the reader in to allow the reader to experience firsthand the pressures Mick deals with as well as the dangers of drug use, Deuker tells the story through Mick's perspective. This gives the reader a personal connection with Mick and allows the reader to understand things firsthand and emotionally the way that Mick himself experiences things emotionally.

This is also emblematic of the plot. Deuker could have told the novel from a third-person perspective, but allowing it to be told from the point of view of Mick, makes everything that goes on in the book about Mick and what happens to Mick. This enhances his characterization. Mick, throughout the book, is always thinking about himself, his future career, thinking about glory and nothing else. Telling the novel in first person cements that self-centered feeling the reader gets from the way Mick thinks and acts.

Setting

The setting of Carl Deuker's novel "Gym Candy" is Seattle, Washington. Seattle is a hotbed for sports-related activity, from baseball to football to soccer. Sports occupy an important place in the consciousness of the city the way that football occupies the pivotal place in the consciousness of Mick Johnson and his father, Mike.

Seattle is the location of Shilshole High School, where Mick, Drew, and DeShawn attend class and play football. The cool weather creates perfect conditions for football and the rain that drenches the city makes for picture-perfect symbolism. Following the conclusion of one successful game, played in the rain, Mick raises his arms up like a professional player and lets the rain pour down around him, which he describes as "diamonds." The rain can be seen in a much more metaphorical respect, as though the sky is coming down on him, which it soon after does. It can also be seen as Mick being trapped in a storm and the rain pouring down is emblematic of the consequences of a storm and the consequences of his drug use.

The location of Seattle is also telling for the number of gyms that Mick acknowledges exist in Seattle. Any one of these gyms could mean more performance-enhancing drugs, Mick concedes to the reader at the very end of the book.



Language and Meaning

Since Carl Deuker tells his novel "Gym Candy" in the first-person perspective of sixteen year-old protagonist Mick Johnson, he tells the novel in very simple, straightforward language. There is no poetic simplicity, technical language, or unnecessary dramatics because the language is supposed to be that of a sixteen-year-old athletic American male.

Telling the novel in this simple and straightforward language benefits the novel in two ways. First, the use of this language makes the story much more believable, as if it is actually being told by a sixteen-year-old football player. It further enhances the characterization of Mick who is more concerned with athletics than academics. All he really seems to know is football and his language reflects that.

Secondly, the use of simple and straightforward language allows the reader to follow the story easily and to take the text at face value. This allows Deuker to make his points loudly and clearly such as his exposure of performance-enhancing drugs as patently dangerous things. The reader is not forced to search for hidden meanings and this is very beneficial given the intended audience of young adults. The simple language does not deter young readers. Deuker makes his points about the dangers of steroids and performance injections clearly.

Structure

Carl Deuker divides "Gym Candy" up into six parts with the final part being labeled an epilogue. Each part is further subdivided into chapters.

Each part of the book deals with a different phase in Mick's life. For example, the first part of the book deals with his childhood and his earliest memories, and serves as an introduction to Mick and his family. Later parts highlight different phases of his introduction to performance enhancing drugs and his addiction to them. The epilogue occurs in the rehabilitation center following Mick's suicide attempt.

Each chapter that Deuker puts together is rarely more than a few pages in length. This is done for two primary reasons. First, each chapter usually focuses around a singular event or memory in chronological order, rather than one continuous, uninterrupted stream of events, so the chapters are short. Secondly, it allows the pace of the story to move quickly, keeping the reader's interest. This is especially important given that the intended audience consists of busy, active young adults. Quick chapters, quick points, and a quick read means that the young reader will stay interested and will not be bogged down by exorbitant details.



Quotes

"A little pressure is good for a boy. Keeps him on his toes" (Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 6).

"I ended up practicing every single day, just like my dad wanted, but I wasn't doing it because I thought I had a chance to start. I was doing it because I didn't know how else to play." (Part 2, Chapter 7, p. 61).

"As game time neared, a sense of power filled me. It started in the back of my head and spread like a wildfire until I felt as if I was going to explode." (Part 2, Chapter 9, p. 69).

"Why had I failed? Why had I come up a foot short? You don't have the talent, a voice whispered -my voice" (Part 2, Chapter 11, p. 82).

"For the next weeks I worked and worked, but nothing changed" (Part 3, Chapter 11, p. 134).

"If you're after serious gains, there's other stuff that produces better results much faster, stuff that a lot of guys in the gym use" (Part 3, Chapter 13, p. 146).

"That was the first time 'roid rage came over me, but once that edgy feeling came, it never entirely left" (Part 4, Chapter 4, p. 166).

"There's something incredible about pulling a helmet on before a game; it's a feeling only a football player knows" (Part 4, Chapter 11, p. 196).

"I had no chances left. Everything was going to end...I was falling fast and I had to grab hold of something, of anything, to stop the fall" (Part 5, Chapter 16, p. 296).

"I know the person I want to become, but I don't know if I can pull it off" (Epilogue, Chapter 3, p. 313).



Topics for Discussion

Throughout the novel "Gym Candy," Mick continues to blow his chances to stop things before they become irreversible. What chances along the way does Mick have to stop using performance-enhancing drugs? Why does he not take these chances?

Mick uses performance enhancing drugs in order to maintain an edge on the football field. Part of the reason why he does this is to help handle the pressures that weigh on him. What are these pressures that Mick has to contend with? What ways, aside from drugs, could Mick have handled his pressure? Why does he decide to use performance-enhancing drugs?

Discuss the theme of downfall as it relates to Mick and his father in the novel "Gym Candy." Why does Mick's father fail as a football player? Why does Mick resolve to be better than his father? When Mick begins using drugs, is his downfall unavoidable? Why or why not? What ultimately brings about Mick's downfall?

Discuss the theme of the absence of fathers in the novel "Gym Candy". In what ways does Mick's father fail Mick? Why is this important to how Mick turns out as a person? Is Mick's father entirely responsible for his son's outcome? Why or why not?

Despite the overwhelming pressure Mick faces, his lack of moral guidance, and his personal desire, is anyone other than Mick to blame for his drug use and his downfall? Why or why not?