

# **The Gospel According to Larry Study Guide**

**The Gospel According to Larry by Janet Tashjian**

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# Plot Summary

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY by Janet Tashjian is the story of a young man who wants to change the world, written as though the author encounters the young man and publishes his manuscript, rather than creating the story herself. Josh creates a website under the pseudonym of Larry, his alter ego, to contribute to the fight against consumerism. When the website becomes popular, Josh's anonymity is compromised, causing his life to turn upside down. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY is an entertaining and informative account of the struggles of a young man whose desire to improve the world is inhibited by the world's consumerism.

In A Note To The Reader, Janet Tashjian is approached by a young man who seems familiar and asks for help publishing his manuscript. After reading the manuscript, she realizes why Josh seems so familiar, and she agrees to help him publish his manuscript. In Part 1, Josh agrees to help Beth, his best friend with whom he is in love, form a school study group based on Larry's website about anti-consumerism, which is written by an anonymous author. Josh is bothered by the fact that Beth is dating Todd when she is so committed to her own personal development, and this leads to an argument between the friends. Though they are reconciled, Josh forgets to mention to Beth that he is Larry. In Part 2, Josh explains that he began the website to alleviate his boredom and did so anonymously because his privacy is very important to him. When Bono from U2 discovers Larry's website and releases a song pertaining to anti-consumerism, the popularity of the site increases rapidly. After Larry publishes a sermon about recognizing worthless relationships, Beth breaks up with Todd; like several of his sermons, this sermon focuses on a veiled account of the relationship between Josh and Beth. betagold begins harassing Larry, insisting that he reveal his identity and threatening to discover it regardless of his agreement, and this worries Josh who fears being discovered to be Larry. With the increased popularity of Larry's website, the Larry study group at Josh's school focuses on preserving Larry's message in the midst of the consumerism beginning to surround his website, so Josh and Beth post flyers promoting anti-consumerism throughout the mall. After this venture, Josh leaves to spend three days in the isolation of nature where he enjoys himself immensely and wonders whether he could become a hermit and reject culture.

When Josh returns from his nature excursion in Part 3, he learns that Bono has planned a music festival called Larryfest. Josh is excited, though betagold continues to threaten to find and reveal his true identity. Josh enjoys himself at Larryfest, and his relationship with Beth seems to take a more romantic turn, nearly causing him to confess that he is Larry. When an older lady drops her toothbrush, Josh offers to give her his own. Returning home from the festival, Larry continues to receive threats from betagold, but Josh will not relinquish his alter ego because he has not completed his work yet. Beth visits Josh, and as they flirt, he nearly tells her that he is Larry; however, he kisses her instead, and when she tells him that she has reconciled with Todd, Josh gets angry and kicks her out of his house. He also argues with Peter, feeling betrayed by the two people to whom he is closest. A knock on the door reveals the older woman with the toothbrush from Larryfest, and Josh is very confused when she introduces herself as



betagold, insists he is Larry and invites the media to witness the scene. In Part 4, the discovery that Josh is Larry changes Josh's life forever. The media does not care about Larry's message, and the increased traffic is too much for his website to handle, forcing him to shut it down. Peter is angry at Josh since the situation causes him to lose many important customers, and Beth insists that she can no longer be friends with Josh since friendship is based on honesty and he has been living a lie. Depressed, Josh hates that Larry has become a product, and when he communicates with Mom, she seems to suggest suicide. Though Josh cannot kill himself, he comes across the word pseudocide in an online dictionary and begins to play with the idea of faking his own suicide.

Josh spends six weeks planning his pseudocide in Part 5, though he does not actually intend to follow through with the plan. He spends three days on a vision quest when he realizes that he is considering the crazy scheme, during which he decides to attempt the act. Josh parks his bike on Sagamore Bridge, throws his clothes in the river and dons his disguise as Gil Jackson. Gil Jackson reports seeing a young man matching Josh's description jump from the bridge before vanishing himself. Josh watches the news reports to ensure no one suspects he is still alive. He is saddened by Peter and Beth's grief as he watches his memorial service, but he comforts himself with the idea of returning in several months after the media frenzy surrounding Larry dies down; unfortunately, fatherhood accusations and conspiracy theories about Josh/Larry force him to realize he can never return to his normal life. After wandering around the country for a while, Josh decides to share his side of the story, so he writes his manuscript and searches for an author to help him publish it. In the Epilogue, Janet Tashjian explains she helped Josh because it was the right thing to do, though she disapproves of his pseudocide. Her life is greatly affected by Larry's teachings, and when her son asks about Larry, she explains that he is a boy she once met who wanted to change the world more than anything.



# A Note To The Reader

## A Note To The Reader Summary

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY by Janet Tashjian is the story of a young man who wants to change the world, written as though the author encounters the young man and publishes his manuscript, rather than creating the story herself. Josh creates a website under the pseudonym of Larry, his alter ego, to contribute to the fight against consumerism. When the website becomes popular, Josh's anonymity is compromised, causing his life to turn upside down. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY is an entertaining and informative account of the struggles of a young man whose desire to improve the world is inhibited by the world's consumerism.

While in line at the grocery store, Janet Tashjian, the author, is approached by a young man who offers her a bundle of papers, claiming he has a great story for her. Instead of taking the bundle, she tells him there are lots of great publishing houses and recommends he start in New York as she continues loading groceries in her car, but he claims his book must get published even though he is not supposed to be here. The boy looks around seventeen years old and vaguely familiar. He has just returned from Walden Pond, and he pulls "Walden" from his back pocket and reads aloud about being a philosopher. Janet agrees to read his manuscript because what else can she say to a kid quoting Thoreau. He explains that it is set up like a term paper with Biblical quotes and stuff from the Internet added in, but it will all make sense when she reads it. When Janet asks how to contact him, he says it is impossible, but he will contact her. As she skims the manuscript on her way home, she realizes why he looks familiar and races back to the store to find that he is already gone. By the time he calls the next day, Janet has already read the entire manuscript. Though she is working on another project, she believes his story is important and needs to be published, and Christy, her editor, is interested in publishing the manuscript as soon as she reads it. Josh also provides a disk of photographs which they add throughout the book. The Epilogue is Janet's idea to add a different perspective. While working on Josh's book, Janet finds it inspirational at times, but at other times, it seems eerie and devoid of meaning. In her research, she finds some who claim Josh is bipolar or has ADHD, and one teacher claims Josh has a "messiah complex;" however, Josh seems perfectly normal to her. Janet talks to Josh for the last time a few months ago, when her editor mails her the galleys, and she points out that if his book is published, people will know he is alive and the whole mess will start up again, but Josh feels it is important for him to be honest right now. Later, Janet tries to reach Josh to give him copies of his book, but he has disappeared again. This is Josh's story.

## A Note To The Reader Analysis

In her introduction, the author claims that she is approached by a young man, Josh, at the grocery store who claims that he wants her to help him publish his manuscript. By



doing this, Tashjian separates herself from the story by claiming it is not a story of fiction written by herself, but instead it is an autobiographical account of Josh's real experiences. She explains how she thought the young man looked familiar, and her understanding of his identity after reading his manuscript indicates the popularity of his alter-ego as is explained in the actual manuscript. This is also evident by her editor's eagerness to publish the young man's work. Josh describes his manuscript accurately since it is, indeed, set up like a term paper with some additions scattered throughout the text. Tashjian explains the results regarding Josh's mental state found in her research but insists that he seems normal to her. Though Josh knows the repercussions of publishing his side of the story, he believes it is more important for him to be honest right now, foreshadowing his chaotic life as seen in his story. After Tashjian has succeeded in fulfilling Josh's wishes to publish his story, he disappears again, indicating that he has disappeared in the past.



# Part 1

## Part 1 Summary

The first part of this novel begins by quoting St. John 21:24 about the truth of a disciple's testimony. Beth, Josh's best friend, has not enjoyed a rant so much since they read Thoreau last semester, and now she tries to convince Josh to form a study group focused on [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com), a popular website whose author is anonymous. Josh tries to listen but grows distracted since he has been in love with Beth since sixth grade. After agreeing to help her with the club, he pretends they are a couple until she waves goodbye and crosses the cafeteria to join Todd, the new jock with whom she is obsessed. The rest of the day passes the same as usual. At home that afternoon, Josh checks his email and looks at Larry's site, but when Peter, his stepfather, enters and sees the computer screen, he complains about the "anonymous coward... bashing our culture online" (page 11). Peter leaves after telling Josh that they are eating dinner with Katherine, his girlfriend whom Josh finds boring, the next day. Josh prints the latest Larry sermon to prepare for Beth tomorrow. Sermon 93 is a complaint against all of the advertising companies which mentions the irony of reading about Big Brother in "1984" when their "lives couldn't be more dictated by the corporations" (page 13). Josh gathers fourteen pages of notes for Beth, deciding he will help as long as possible provided he can leave the club when it gets too weird. He has done a lot for Beth over the years, and it has been worth it. Joining is not usually Josh's thing. Katherine calls him quirky, but the kids at school say he is weird; he is used to it because it has always been that way, but he has never cared what the other kids think. When his mother was alive, she had been a tireless advocate for him and had ensured stimulation was high for most of his life with her. Learning had excited him as a child, and he had had no interest in the usual activities of children. He has always wanted to contribute to making the world a better place, and his highest priority is to push civilization forward with more ideas and more meaning.

Until the bell rings, Beth and Josh discuss how Larry's sermons seem to have everything to do with their lives. Larry has less than eighty possessions of which he posts pictures on his website, daring people to guess who he is, but his identity is a secret for now. When Josh invites Beth over to discuss ideas for the club, she claims she needs to study for a calculus test, but when he calls her out on being a terrible liar, she admits that she has promised to help Todd clean his basement tonight. Josh teases her about wasting her time with a cretin when she is so committed to personal growth, but she defends herself by saying Todd is the coolest guy who has ever liked her and she wants his popularity to rub off on her for a while. Annoyed, Josh walks away from Beth, upset that he is never included in the endless list of guys on whom Beth has a crush. During his guidance session with Ms. Phillips, he discusses his desire to study philosophy in college, despite Ms. Phillips' objections that job prospects are limited with such a major. Josh decides to skip school for the rest of the day in order to check in with his mother. Peter visits her at the cemetery, but because Josh knows her better, he heads somewhere that better captures her spirit, the make-up counter at



Bloomington's. Since business is slow, he sits in a chair at the Chanel counter in the lotus position. Josh asks Mom if she will help him change the world, and in his usual fashion, listens for a response in the next words that someone says. A businessman says, "Yes of course I will," so Josh thanks Mom and leaves the store. A photo of a laptop, Larry items number 8, fills the next page. Katherine laughs nervously at everything Josh and Peter say, putting a lot of effort into being liked, but though Peter is happy with the lasagna she makes for dinner, she never remembers that Josh is a vegetarian. When the conversation turns to EBay as it always does with Katherine, Josh excuses himself, claiming he has lots of homework. He takes a walk and ends up at Beth's house as she runs up her driveway. Beth admits that Todd definitely does not appreciate her, and she can never have a normal conversation with him like she can with Josh. They go to her basement to read Larry's latest sermon, and Beth is shocked because, "It's like he writes things just for you, no matter what you're thinking" (page 35). Sermon 97 talks about whether relationships are meaningful, and Beth says she is done with Todd and is going to focus on important things now, like the Larry club. Beth and Josh work until her father asks him to leave. After Beth hugs him in a friends-only kind of way, Josh walks home, thinking about everything he had forgotten to tell Beth, like how they can set up links from Larry's homepage, spring is only a few weeks away and about his conversation with Ms. Phillips this morning. Also, he had forgotten to mention that he is Larry; he is not much of a detail person.

## Part 1 Analysis

Though Larry's website is not particularly religious, Josh begins each part of his manuscript with a Biblical quote. St. John 21:24 begins the first part by mentioning the importance of truth in a disciple's testimony, foreshadowing a disciple of some kind to be introduced in this part of the story. As the narrative begins, the relationship between Josh and Beth is emphasized. They are best friends, but Josh has been in love with her for about six years. Beth convinces Josh to help her form a study group based on [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com), a popular website whose author is anonymous. This indicates the importance of this website in the story and foreshadows the focus on the anonymity of the website's author. Josh reveals that he is jealous of Beth's relationship with Todd, and this recurs throughout the narrative. While Josh checks Larry's website at home, Peter, his stepfather, displays his animosity toward the unknown author who is complaining against advertising companies, Peter's livelihood. Josh admits his dislike for Katherine, Peter's girlfriend, as well. Sermon 93 protests against consumerism with an allusion to 1984 by George Orwell. Josh also prepares notes from Larry's website for Beth, deciding to participate in the club as long as he can leave if it gets too weird. It is evident that Josh's agreement has more to do with his love for Beth than any desire to join a school club.

In fact, Josh describes himself in the following passage as not being a joiner. His peers think he is weird because he has always preferred learning to the usual activities of children. Josh has always wanted to make the world a better place by pushing civilization forward with more ideas and more meaning. Josh's ideas seem to parallel those of Larry, foreshadowing some sort of connection between the two. The next day at





school, Josh and Beth discuss Larry and his anonymity. Beth postpones hanging out with Josh to discuss the Larry club because she has plans with Todd; she admits that Todd is mentally inferior, but she is eager to increase her social status at school which annoys Josh. During his conversation with his guidance counselor, Josh claims that he wants to be a philosopher, also linking him to Larry. Josh explains that his mother is dead and demonstrates how he communicates with her when he goes to Bloomingdale's. He feels that he has not contributed in his life and asks Mom to help him change the world. In the context of their communication, she agrees. The first Larry item, a laptop, provides a clue to Larry's identity, though it is a very vague clue. Josh's irritation with Katherine at dinner shows his distaste for his stepfather's girlfriend, and he directs his thoughts toward Beth, showing his infatuation. Beth admits that Todd does not appreciate her and seems to indicate that she reciprocates Josh's romantic feelings when she claims she can have a normal conversation with Josh, though not with Todd. When they read Larry's latest sermon about whether relationships are meaningful, Beth is astounded at how Larry seems to write about exactly what is going on in her life. This also foreshadows a connection between Josh and Larry. When Josh leaves, this foreshadowing is fulfilled when he claims he has forgotten to tell his best friend that he is Larry.



## Part 2, pages 39-73

### Part 2, pages 39-73 Summary

Part 2 begins by quoting St. Matthew 10:39, that he who loses his life for my sake shall find it. Larry's website has grown out of Josh's boredom, his need to rebel and as a distraction from his grief after his mother's death. He has designed the site, using his cell phone as a modem so the line could not be traced since, even online, his privacy is crucial. At first, the site is funny, but Josh begins to put more effort into his sermons when the site becomes more popular. He begins posting pictures of his possessions when he receives emails asking his identity, but the whole situation is a Catch 22; he is happy others are interested, but since he cannot take credit because Larry is anonymous, it leaves Josh in the awkward position of starting his own fan club. He spends an hour deciding which possession to post on the website the next day, finally posting Larry Item number 11, a belt hanging on his doorknob. From living with an advertising executive for five years, Josh learns that his website needs a niche, either a message or a product. He cannot sell a product since he is non-materialistic and actually has only seventy-five possessions. He trades CDs and books for new ones and rents skis and other items. He has been like this "since eighth grade when [he] read about some Native Americans not wanting to leave too many 'footprints' on the earth when they left" (page 46). Every purchase is a major decision since it must be worth removing something else from his possessions. Deciding to write about what he knows, anti-consumerism, Larry's message becomes to take on waste, overspending and cultural brainwashing. Though it had not been an elaborate plan to impress Beth during her extended Thoreau phase, that aspect does not hurt. The first Larry meeting overflows with students from every clique, and as Beth runs the meeting, Josh is overwhelmed with Larry's increasing popularity and realizes he is changing the world, a little at a time. Peers who will not even speak to Josh analyze and interpret Larry's every word. After the meeting, Josh and Beth brainstorm, and then she invites him to dinner at her house. The new level of their relationship makes the evolution of the world's spiritual growth seem meaningless to Josh until Todd approaches and invites Beth over, causing her to postpone her plans with Josh. Telling Mom that he needs help, Josh stands there until he knows what he needs to do; then, he runs.

Though Josh usually writes his sermons in his basement, "this called for a whole new level of solitude" (page 53). He bikes to the nature preserve behind the cemetery and descends to the underground room he has dug for a place to think. He writes Sermon 113 which complains about people who are his best friend until someone better comes along, insisting that social climbing is as bad as people climbing up the corporate ladder. He is tired of accepting people back when their new friends reject them. Josh decides to send the sermon later so Beth thinks she is safe from Larry's gaze for a few more minutes. Humbled by the silence and openness of the forest, Josh wants to be a hermit every time he comes here, and he wonders if a culture junkie like him can live disconnected from civilization. Luckily, he does not have to decide today. Larry Items 14 and 32 are a watch and a statue of an elephant, the Hindu deity Ganesh. Two days



later, Josh attends Beth's piano recital, and on the way home, they complain about the college application process. The next day, Beth waves a paper at Josh and asks if he has read the newest sermon. She insists it is about her and apologizes, asking jokingly if Josh had called Larry and asked him to write it up. Beth also shows him a disconcerting email from betagold, challenging Larry to reveal his identity. When Beth leaves to work in her father's hardware store, Josh rushes home to answer betagold's email, but he wonders if betagold is right and he hides behind Larry because he is afraid no one will listen if they know what a loser he is. In Sermon 137, Larry discusses the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Half of the six billion people on the planet live on less than two dollars each day. Nature is going to mutiny one day because of how poorly mankind has treated it. "We're not fit to live in the world anymore; we're tourists, clear-cutting our way across the planet till nothing's left" (page 65). Over the next several weeks, Josh begins to see the effect that Larry is having on the rest of the nation as kids across the country reject commercialism; however, his joy is short-lived because betagold leaves another message on the message board. He claims he is closing in on Larry and the world deserves to know who Larry is. Because Larry had mentioned red maples in his last sermon, betagold realizes Larry must live in New England. Nervously, Josh replies that he feels his identity will only hinder his work, but he worries about betagold who, like Larry, can be anyone at all. At 2 a.m. one morning, Josh picks the lock to Peter's briefcase and finds extremely confidential future ad campaigns aimed at the lucrative youth market. Josh scans the report onto his hard drive and puts the original back in Peter's briefcase. He sits up all night, rearranging the ads into mock-ads which he posts on Larry's website, hoping for a reaction. By breakfast, two hundred and sixty-seven people respond, and some even post their own versions of the ads. This makes Josh feel closer to Peter since he is "following in his footsteps in a subversive, anticonsumer way" (page 72). Larry Items 26, 2, 17 and 21 are posted, showing jeans, socks, white boxers and a black t-shirt.

## Part 2, pages 39-73 Analysis

The Biblical quote which opens Part 2, from Matthew 10:39, claims that he who loses his life for God's sake shall find it. Josh begins this part of his story by explaining why and how Larry's website began. He also emphasizes how it progressed from a comic extracurricular activity into something more serious. Unfortunately, as his website becomes more popular, Josh is placed in an uncomfortable position since he cannot take credit for his idea since Larry is supposed to be anonymous. This awkwardness leads Josh to starting his own fan club. After much time spent debating, he decides to post Larry Item 11, a belt hanging from his doorknob. Josh continues explaining how he has developed Larry's message from his own anti-consumerist attitude and how his beliefs originate from reading about Native Americans' desire to avoid leaving footprints on the earth. Though Larry has not been created to impress Beth, Josh admits that she has influenced his creation to some extent, though unwittingly. The first Larry meeting is filled with students who, ironically, normally do not speak to Josh, yet they analyze and discuss every word Larry posts. Josh and Beth make plans to further brainstorm for the club, but she ditches him when Todd invites her to hang out. Hurt and confused, Josh asks Mom for advice, and he runs to accomplish what he suddenly knows he must do.



Since Sermon 113 is special, Josh writes it in his underground room which indicates his affinity for solitude. He writes about friends who neglect their true friends when something better comes along, but since the sermon is obviously directed at Beth, he decides to wait a few days before posting it to avoid his alter-ego being discovered. Josh questions whether he can live apart from civilization, and though it is not necessary at this point, his pondering foreshadows the need in the future. Larry Item number 32 is a statue of the Hindu deity, Ganesh, and this is the first possession Josh publishes that is not extremely vague and nearly impossible to trace. Several days later, Beth reads Larry's latest sermon which Josh had written after their last fight, and she asks if Josh had asked Larry to write it, seemingly indicating that she suspects Josh has a connection to Larry. She also introduces betagold, an anonymous follower of Larry who challenges him to reveal his identity. Josh worries about betagold uncovering his identity, but he also questions his reasons behind hiding under his alter-ego. Summoning courage, he convinces himself that he is safe from betagold and writes Sermon 137 about poverty in the world and how poorly mankind has treated nature. Josh's excitement at Larry's increasing popularity is dulled by another message from betagold who has figured out that Larry lives in New England since he mentions red maples in one of his sermons and they are abundant in that area of the country. Though Josh insists he fears his identity will only hinder his work, he worries about betagold's identity since, like Larry being Josh, betagold could be absolutely anyone. Josh, admitting his hunger for knowledge can be mischievous, borrows future ad campaigns from Peter's briefcase and manipulates them to post mock ads on Larry's site. His desire for a reaction is well fulfilled when he receives many responses by breakfast-time. He feels close to Peter, as though he is following in his footsteps, though he is doing so in the exact opposite manner. He posts jeans, socks, boxers and a t-shirt as the next Larry Items.



## Part 2, p. 74-108

### Part 2, p. 74-108 Summary

Though the photo of Larry's clothes convinces Beth that Larry is a guy, she has no interest in tracking him down, but she mentions the newest message from betagold who wonders if Larry is fabricating his most recent information. While reading the tarot cards she received from her sister in the cafeteria, Beth is upset when she pulls the death card for Josh, but he suggests that perhaps it refers to him going to the cemetery today. Beth knows that the three year anniversary of his mom's death is this week so she produces a short note in an envelope to place with his flowers. During biology, Josh reads the note which tells Mom she would be proud of him. On the way home, he stops at the florist, and the ride to the cemetery with Peter is filled with awkward silence. At the cemetery, Mom's tombstone has just been put back after having the graffiti removed, and Josh is shocked and bothered to see his own name and birth year on the stone beneath his Mom's. Peter explains that Mom thought Josh would want to be buried with her and it made sense to add it while the stone was being cleaned. Josh wonders when his death year will be. After Peter pays his respects, he steps back to allow Josh to have time alone with Mom, "as if we both knew she always belonged more fully to me than to him" (page 79). Josh has always been superstitious, and he worries that the signs of his death might point toward another part of him, Larry, dying; however, it is too soon to give Larry up because his work is not yet finished. Sermon 163 discusses the waste that results from the consumption of celebrities. Word of mouth increases as Larry posts each of his possessions, and the total hits for the website grow by more than ninety percent each day. In May, the focus of all conversations is prom and graduation, but May should go at a manageable pace since Josh is not attending either. Unfortunately, two things happen. Billy North from the University of Georgia uses a stencil system to identify Larry from certain words, realizing Larry must live in New England. He claims Larry cannot subvert the system because he subconsciously wants to be discovered, so Josh spends an increased amount of time editing his sermons, but the words in the stencil still point to him, and he fears Larry will sabotage his own career. [B]etagold writes that he will track Larry in the old-fashioned way. Though Josh should quit, he does not because Larry is the perfect alter-ego. Feeling he must do his share, he continues to fight consumerism. Larry Items 33, 42, 50, 51 and 73 are glasses and four books.

Larry's sermon about six billion people living on less than two dollars a day stirs up discussions in various chat rooms, so Larry writes a follow-up sermon about the World Bank and how it could help Third World countries by forgiving some of their debt. There is not much fanfare until Bono from U2 reads it while researching for a presentation he is giving to the U. S. Senate on the World Bank and Third World debt. U2 also releases a new song about anti-materialism which leads millions of fans to Larry's website. When Beth tells Josh that Larry has received over a million hits, she thinks it is odd when Josh worries whether Larry has enough memory. She worries that Larry's message will get diluted in all of the commercialism. When she leaves, Josh asks Mom if getting the



message out to more people is good, and if he should run for cover when the house fills with Katherine's laughter. Josh decides to stop being paranoid since the Larry club at school has swelled to include seventy-eight percent of the senior class and several teachers. They discuss how to ensure Larry's message does not get lost in his increasing popularity. When Josh returns home, he finds a large increase in the number of pseudo-ads on Larry's site, and he upgrades his server with pleasure since U2 has empowered the site. Unfortunately, Josh leaves his handouts in the kitchen where Peter finds them and goes on a rampage about how it is only a matter of time before Larry gets caught. No one knows where Larry gets his information, but now, Peter needs to develop all new campaigns; Josh feels badly because he never planned to hurt Peter. Peter forbids Josh to bring anything about Larry into the house before leaving in silence. The schism between them is achingly obvious, and Josh assumes Peter is equally happy that he will be leaving for Princeton in a few months. Larry Item 41 is a pair of snow boots. As they lock their bikes up, Josh gives Beth a necklace for her birthday, and Beth shows him the birthday gift she has given herself: a tattoo on her ankle of a dollar sign in a circle with a slash through it. They plaster posters throughout the mall, sparking conversations, and when they take a short break, Mr. Lynch, their biology teacher, approaches to praise them in an animated rant. When Mr. Lynch leaves, Beth wonders if he is Larry; it is hard not to wonder who Larry is when everyone talks about it so much. Satisfied with a job well done, Josh and Beth return to sit on her front steps until she leaves for a piano lesson. Josh is leaving for three days on a nature excursion because he enjoys the solitude. He is sad to leave Beth but glad to be under the stars alone. "Little did [he] know what could happen in three days" (page 107). Sermon 213 discusses spending time alone in Nature and how seclusion makes real life seem superficial and self-indulgent; man is meant to be alone in Nature.

## Part 2, p. 74-108 Analysis

From the most recent Larry Items, Beth is convinced that Larry is male, and though she has no interest in uncovering Larry's identity, she mentions betagold's most recent email. [B]etagold wonders if Larry is fabricating his information since he has never found it before. Beth is unnerved when she pulls death for Josh when reading his tarot cards, and though he suggests it may pertain to visiting his mom's grave, he wonders if it does relate to his death in some way. Josh is happy when he reads Beth's note to his mom and it says Mom would be proud of him. Josh and Peter visit Mom's grave, and Katherine's desire to join them indicates the seriousness of her relationship with Peter. Josh is uncomfortable when he sees his name and birth year engraved on Mom's tombstone, and after his visit, he wonders if the signs of death, his name on the tombstone and the tarot card, indicate Larry's pending death; however, Josh stubbornly refuses to give Larry up yet because his work is still unfinished. Sermon 163 compares celebrities to objects in terms of how they are consumed and objects to such consumption.

As Larry's popularity continues to increase, Josh is unnerved when a college student devises a stencil to use Larry's words to identify him, and Josh worries that Larry will sabotage his own career when his extensive editing fails to thwart the stencil system.



When betagold continues to threaten to discover Larry's identity, Josh admits he should have quit, but he does not because he enjoys his alter-ego and he feels he must continue to fight consumerism. Since Larry's sermon about poverty stirs up much conversation, Josh writes a follow-up about the World Bank and Third World debt which draws the attention of a celebrity, Bono from U2. This leads to an increase of traffic on Larry's website which causes Beth to worry that Larry's message will be consumed by the very thing, commercialism, he is most against. Josh asks Mom if reaching more people is a good thing, and Katherine's laughter seems to foreshadow doom. The attendance at meetings of the Larry club increases, and the members attempt to preserve Larry's message in the increasing consumerism surrounding his website. Josh is happy when he needs to upgrade his server because of how many hits he receives. He and Peter argue about Larry when Peter finds hand-outs for the Larry club, and it is obvious that Peter does not agree with or approve of Larry's message. Josh and Beth celebrate her birthday by posting Larry posters throughout the mall, and Josh worries when Beth begins to speculate about Larry's identity. Josh decides to spend several days in nature and is excited for the solitude it promises. His statement that he did not know what could happen in three days foreshadows some major catastrophe on the Larry front. He is indiscreet when Larry posts a sermon about spending time in nature while Josh is doing the same, but he does not seem to consider this mistake until after the fact.





## Part 3

### Part 3 Summary

Part 3 begins with a quote from St. Mark 1:11 in which a voice from heaven is well-pleased with His beloved son. Josh is nervous to spend lunch with Beth since Larry had written about spending time alone in the woods while he had been doing the same, but her news yanks him into an alternate reality; Bono has organized a rock festival to be held in Maine as a gathering of anti-consumerism, and he calls it Larryfest! The message boards beg Larry to come, even if he remains incognito. Overwhelmed, Josh visits his Mom at Bloomingdale's after school, and when a man tells his wife to continue her life's work, Josh knows he must exemplify Larry's beliefs nonstop, and Larryfest is the perfect place to start. The next day, an email from betagold jolts Josh "out of [his] peace, love and understanding reverie" (page 115). Asking if Larry will be at Larryfest, betagold claims he will find Larry. Josh does not respond because there is no way betagold can track him down out of 230,000 people all signed up, unless he is being set up. Larry Item 57 is a Canon camera. Sermon 271 questions if Larryfest is possible. Larry promises to be there; he will be the guy with a t-shirt and a smile. The next page shows Josh's ticket for Larryfest. Larryfest is overwhelming. People of all ages attend because they are attracted to Larry's message. Bono claims he does not want to know who Larry is as he plays what fans now call "Larry's Theme." On the second day, Beth and Josh visit booths, and after Beth buys a wizard hat for Josh, they find a booth sponsored by betagold with a petition for Larry to reveal his identity. When Beth wonders what Larry thinks about the petition, Josh says, "he probably hopes betagold will just go away" (page 125). As Beth takes possession of his hand, Josh does not want to ruin the perfection of the present by worrying about the future. They return to the camp and lay under the stars with Josh's arm casually around Beth. As they consider what Larry must be like, Josh decides to confess that he is Larry to Beth, but he is interrupted by three girls from Chicago handing out lyrics to a song for everyone to sing in the morning. The moment has passed so Josh does not confide in Beth. He wonders if he has blown in when she goes to bed but decides he did the right thing by practicing restraint. The next morning, he offers his toothbrush to an older woman when she drops hers. Since she smells like Mom's hand lotion, Josh asks Mom what she thinks, and the lady will never know how she makes Josh's day when she tells him his mother would be so proud of him.

Sermon 272 claims they did it with idealism and without corporate endorsements, though no one said they could. "Change the world? Did. Are. Can" (page 129). Larry Items 62 and 67 are a photo frame and a chain. Excited as he reads Larry's messages, Josh thinks even betagold cannot scare him until he reads that betagold is flying to Boston next week to track Larry down. After several days spent worrying, Josh decides to commit himself further; there is no decision between fight or flight. Early Saturday afternoon, Beth wonders why Josh wears a life jacket with his pajamas, and he explains that he sleeps prepared since he keeps dreaming about drowning. After putting the life jacket on Beth, he decides to tell her he is Larry, but he kisses her instead, only to find





she is dating Todd again and wants Josh to be at least a little happy for her. She hopes they can still be friends, but Josh cannot bear "her insistence on wanting [him] to be happy that someone else was stealing the girl [he'd] always loved right out from under [him]" (p. 136-137). When she claims she is like his sister, Josh makes Beth leave. He barely has the energy to greet Peter and Katherine when they return from shopping. When Peter and Katherine discuss how Larry will soon be caught, Josh defends Larry and puts his life jacket back on because he is drowning in feelings of alienation, disgust and betrayal from Beth and Peter, the people to whom he is closest in the world. Just as he thinks nothing can be worse, the doorbell rings, and he answers it to reveal the old lady who needed a toothbrush at Larryfest. Beth reappears from the kitchen because there is a camera crew outside, and the old woman, motioning the crew forward, tells Josh to confess he is Larry. When he denies it, she introduces herself as Tracy Hawthorne but says he can call her betagold. As Beth screams, Josh is discombobulated by betagold's hand cream filling the room with memories of his mother. She looks at him and says, "I should have recognized you at the festival. You were the one with the t-shirt and the smile" (p. 141).

### Part 3 Analysis

A quote from Mark 1:11 begins this part of the story with a voice from heaven claiming he is well-pleased with his beloved son, seeming to indicate that Josh's mother is pleased, or proud, of Josh. Josh worries that Beth will conclude he is Larry since he had written about the joys of solitude in nature when he, as Josh, had been enjoying the same refuge; however, the foreshadowing from the previous part of the story is fulfilled instead when Beth explains to Josh what can happen during three days away- Larryfest has been organized. Overwhelmed, Josh seeks his mother's advice and is told to continue his life's work. [B]etagold's email disturbs him, but Josh reassures himself of his anonymity in such a large crowd and promises his readers that he will attend the festival. The fact that Larryfest occurs, its large attendance and how overwhelming Josh finds the event is testament to Larry's increased popularity among all age groups. [B]etagold's persistence is evident as he sets up a booth with a petition for Larry to reveal his identity. Beth and Josh hold hands, changing their relationship to a slightly more romantic one. Just as Josh decides to tell Beth the truth, he is interrupted, but he decides that he has done the right thing by not admitting his alter-ego. The next morning, Josh shows his good-nature and his desire to improve the world by offering his toothbrush to an older lady who drops hers, and she makes his day when she claims his mother would be proud of him. After Larryfest, Sermon 272 expresses Josh's pride at the success of the event. He is confident and does not fear even betagold until he reads that betagold is flying to Boston next week to track him down; yet, Josh shows his determination by continuing to fight instead of hiding from betagold's penetrating gaze. Josh wears a life jacket over his pajamas because he keeps dreaming about drowning, foreshadowing the discovery of Larry's identity and his pseudocide. He decides to tell Beth about being Larry but kisses her instead, leading to a fight with his best friend when she confesses that she is dating Todd again. He is then disagreeable with Peter and Katherine, because he feels that Peter and Beth, the two people he is closest to in the world, have betrayed him. The old woman who lost her toothbrush at Larryfest



appears at Josh's door, and her alter-ego is foreshadowed right before she announces it when Beth returns to ask about the news crew outside Josh's house. Ironically, the old woman to whom Josh had been so kind to at Larryfest is actually his nemesis, betagold. Beth is angry, as is Peter, but Josh is confused since the woman who is his enemy smells like his mother.



## Part 4

### Part 4 Summary

The fourth part begins with a quote from St. Matthew 16:26 which asks what a man profits by gaining the world but losing his own soul, and this is followed by a page filled with headlines about the revelation that Josh is Larry. Josh's life stops resembling reality the moment betagold steps into the living room, changing his life forever. "Josh Swensen died that day. [He] just didn't know it yet" (p. 147). There are some positive aspects about being revealed to be Larry, such as talking to Bono and activists from Amnesty International about the World Bank strategy, plus Josh no longer worries about giving Larry away. At first, he tries to concentrate on the positives of the media attention, like the fact that Larry's message can reach a new audience of people without internet access; however, the media does not care about Larry's philosophy, and they only want to know about Josh's personal life. Larry becomes a product, and products are consumed. Josh notes the irony of Larry's rants against consuming the lives of celebrities as his life becomes tabloid material. Furious at losing four of his biggest clients, Peter cruelly interrogates Josh and insists he retract his sermons, but Josh refuses. Though Peter appreciates that Josh is trying to improve the world, he believes his idealism is a phase that will pass. After Peter leaves, Josh tries to savor his contributions but finds it hard when confronted with something he has destroyed. He considers denying that he is Larry to bail Peter out, but his beliefs are an integral part of his life. Angry about Josh's secret identity, Beth ignores his calls and emails, and her father claims she is not home when Josh tries to visit. On a Sunday afternoon when he knows Beth will be doing inventory, Josh visits the hardware store. When Beth says he should have told her, he admits that he almost did several times. They discuss how miserable the attention makes Josh. Beth had never suspected he was Larry, but it makes sense in hindsight. Saying it is hard to be friends right now, she needs to get some perspective on all of this, but she will maybe talk to Josh soon. Josh sneaks out of the store and bikes to the woods where his visits have become more frequent. He considers permanently setting up camp here if the frenzy does not calm down, and maybe that is not such a bad idea at this rate. Within two months, the book deals kick in, with two unauthorized biographies and a copy of Larry's sermons being published. Josh is disappointed when the fact that the website cannot handle 255 million hits daily forces him to shut it down, but it is worse that no one wants to discuss the issues anymore. Companies slammed in his sermons approach Josh to endorse their products, and though Coca Cola offers to give the job to Peter's agency, Josh still cannot do it. He sleeps under the Larson's porch so he does not have to deal with Peter again. Josh feels like a guppy in a tank filled with piranhas, and it is only a matter of time before he is swallowed whole.

Josh next sees Beth in the cemetery when she emails him to meet her there. He had always dreamed her reaction to his alter-ego would be more positive. Beth tells Josh goodbye since friendship is based on honesty and he has been living a giant lie. She is angry about the consumerism of Larry and yells at Josh not to preach to her about



Larry's philosophy since half of his rants originated with her. After saying she has broken up with Todd because they have nothing in common, Beth admits she has wanted her and Josh to be a couple since ninth grade, but they should just end it now. Beth feels the need to contribute on a more personal level. As she leaves, Josh objects that they never even tried, but she does not stop. [B]etagold is right that Josh is a coward; he is unable to admit his real feelings until it is already too late. He calls out to Mom, but she does not answer. A plane flies overhead with a banner claiming that Larry drinks Mountain Dew. Josh sits on the couch with a bag of potato chips, moping. Though he releases a statement that Peter had known nothing about his pseudo-ads, Peter still loses many customers. Josh sits and channel surfs in the clothes he has worn for days. When he sees a Swiss psychiatrist on the Today Show interpret Larry's preschool drawing, Josh calls in because he has never drawn the picture, but he hangs up in disgust when the psychiatrist claims he is in denial. Josh is trapped, bored, hated and worshipped, but worst of all, he is noncontributing. He signs an autograph for the mailman worth \$300 on EBay as a bribe to borrow his uniform for an hour, and Josh takes the bus to Bloomingdale's to ask Mom what he should do. When a woman says she could kill herself sometimes, Josh realizes that even his connection with his mother is gone. Josh does not miss Mom enough to join her, yet the universe seems to hint that the option should at least be considered. When the press breaks for lunch, Josh pedals his bike out of town with no destination in mind. He stops at Sagamore Bridge to prove how insane the idea of suicide is. He feels content for the first time in weeks, alone at last, leaving everyone behind. When he realizes he could never jump off such a bridge, he is partially happy because he does not want to die, but he is also disappointed to cross another option off his list. He wipes the tears from his eyes. Josh sits on his bed the next day, working with Greek and Latin roots. He comes across the word pseudocide, to pretend to kill oneself, and considers the option. Perhaps, it will allow him to have his life back and start again as someone new. He begins to plan what he would need to do if he chooses such an option, hypothetically, wondering if he is actually considering it seriously. "Just like finding pseudocide in the online dictionary, the sign I was searching for came from the words themselves. The first pages of ideas began with he and someone. The last few pages all began with I" (page 178).

## Part 4 Analysis

The Biblical quote from Matthew 16:26 that begins Part 4 of Josh's story compares Josh's situation to gaining the world, through popularity as Larry, but losing his soul, his friend, family and solitude. An allusion to Lewis Carroll's THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS is used as a metaphor for the craziness that Josh's life becomes after he is revealed to be Larry. He even claims that he died as Josh that day, though he did not realize it yet. Josh discusses the positive and negative aspects of being discovered to be Larry, but although he tries to focus on the positive aspects, he finds this difficult since no one is interested in Larry's message; they are now only curious about Josh's personal life, and this irritates him. Josh's alter-ego causes problems for Peter in his career which strains their relationship. Josh's relationship with Beth also takes a detrimental turn. Visiting his underground room, Josh considers relocating to it permanently, and this action seems much more necessary than it had been only a few



weeks earlier. Josh is even forced to shut down Larry's website which does not decrease the paparazzi surrounding and harassing him. He tries his best not to sell out, refusing to endorse products, but Larry still becomes a product to be consumed. Josh's metaphor to drowning continues when he expresses the feeling of being a guppy to be swallowed by a tank filled with piranhas. When Beth confronts Josh to say they can no longer be friends, she admits that she has had romantic feelings for him for several years, but it is now too late; Josh feels like a coward for not telling Beth his true feelings in time. Even his connection to his mother seems to be lost. Josh sinks into depression because he has lost the people closest to him and he can no longer contribute. When he sneaks away to Bloomingdale's to talk to Mom, her message is to kill himself, a suggestion he considers but finds impossible. The next day, he comes across the word pseudocide in an online dictionary, and this seems to point to the answer which Mom perhaps really meant. Josh plays with the idea, planning how to accomplish such an act, though he insists he does not really plan to go through with it. Wondering if he is actually considering such an insane scheme, Josh finds his answer in how he words his notes. Though he begins with discussing an abstract third person, the last few pages of his notes claim possession of his idea, referring to the possible plan in the first person.



## Part 5

### Part 5 Summary

After a quote from St. John 20:9 about rising from the dead, Josh jumps out of bed with his former energy the next day because he has a new project on which to focus, though he probably will not go through with it. He considers the best way to hypothetically die, noting the media will never stop looking if he is simply lost or missing, and his mind continually returns to drowning. Going with his instincts, he lists everything he will need to do to accomplish his plan. His anticipation and enthusiasm remind him of when he had first started Larry's website. Josh knows there will be lots of news coverage, but the story will die down eventually, and though Peter will be upset, Josh thinks he may be better off without his stepson; perhaps, his clients will even forgive him during his grief, allowing him to rebuild his business. Beth will probably take his death hard also, and though he does not want to hurt her, he hopes she will be upset because at least that indicates she still cares. The good outweighs the bad. Josh will be able to move around the country undisturbed with his solitude returned. He cannot be Josh of course, "but being anyone these days was better than being Josh OR Larry" (p. 185). Although he still does not plan on going through with his scheme, he picks a day when Peter will be out of town and marks it with "D for Destiny. D for Death" (p. 185). Josh decides against leaving a suicide note so he can still return and say he never jumped off the bridge. He sells a few stocks his mom left him which will allow him to live frugally for several months, and he orders three birth certificates and licenses from different cities of guys near his age who died so he can switch between the three identities whenever necessary. Josh tells himself to be the hero of his own life. After spending six weeks assembling information, he admits that he is considering going through with his crazy plan so he decides he needs a vision quest. He spends three nights in his underground room, wondering why he has such a hard time embracing just being Josh. On the third night, he recalls when Native Americans had gone on vision quests, they either died, came back crazy, returned home or disappeared without a trace. On the fourth day, Josh knows which option he will choose. On the appointed day, Josh says goodbye to sixty-three of his possessions, taking twelve with him. Hiding his newly cut and dyed hair beneath the hood of his sweatshirt, he leaves unnoticed and says goodbye to the familiar objects he passes as he bikes to the bridge without changing his mind. Near the middle of the bridge, he parks his bike and throws his sneakers and sweatshirt into the water, donning glasses and new running shoes. Josh flags down the next car and, describing himself, claims some guy just jumped from the bridge. He worries someone will recognize him as a crowd gathers, and when the police arrive, he identifies himself as Gil Jackson who has been camping here all week. Before he leaves, the policeman asks for his phone number to contact him if necessary, but Josh convinces him to provide his card, promising to call when he settles into Los Angeles since he is leaving tonight. Josh excuses himself and moves further away as the crowd increases; "it came down, as it always did, to a visceral decision. [He] never looked back" (p. 196).



## Part 5 Analysis

The fifth part of this novel begins by quoting John 20:9 about rising from the dead. Josh is energized by his new project, planning his pseudocide, though he still insists that he will not actually carry through with his plan. He puts a lot of thought into the details, such as what mode of death will be believable to the ever-persistent media. Josh knows that the media will sensationalize his death, but he hopes that things will improve for Peter after the news leaves Larry alone. Josh hopes Beth is upset when she hears of his death as well, since it will indicate she still cares about him. He carefully plans his pseudocide, determining to feign drowning since it will be logical for his body to never be found. Josh believes the positive outweighs the negative when considering pseudocide as an option, but he still does not plan to carry through with the plan, though he chooses a day on which to orchestrate it. He decides not to leave a suicide note so that he can return in several months and claim he never jumped off the bridge; he even concocts a story to explain his absence with amnesia. He spends three weeks preparing for his pseudocide, acquiring money from stocks his mother left him and procuring several aliases to use. When he realizes he is actually considering going through with his plan, he goes on a vision quest for three days and returns ready to carry through with his pseudocide. Josh packs a few of his belongings and dons a disguise. After biking to the bridge, he throws some of his stuff into the water and reports seeing a young man jump, describing himself. Assuming one of his aliases, he makes a report to the police and quickly disappears to avoid being recognized.





## Part 6

### Part 6 Summary

Part 6 opens with a quote from St. Luke 24:23, 31 which says that though they did not find his body, they knew him when a vision of angels said he was alive, he vanished from their sight. Josh checks into a motel in a suburb north of Boston to watch the chaos surrounding his suicide. The police track Peter down, and though the television coverage cannot document his private moments, Josh imagines Peter berating himself; it nearly convinces him to call Peter, but he reminds himself that the situation is only temporary. It gives Josh the creeps to watch students from his school cry, and he tries not to hate betagold when she gives a press conference denying her fault in Josh's suicide. For the next few days, Josh watches the news coverage continually to ensure there is no doubt of his death since this would cause his plan to fail. He plans to return in six months, claiming his bike had been stolen and he had lost his memory when he was knocked from his bike. The official stamp of suicide is finally given, and Peter schedules the memorial service for the next day. Crowds of people assemble outside of the cemetery, and Josh is shocked when Beth takes the podium and speaks confidently about how Josh became Larry to contribute to the world and would hate this circus. As she disappears into the crowd, Josh wants to race to her, but the idea of seeing her again in a few months is the only thing making his exile bearable since she will surely be willing to be friends again. Josh cries for Peter's pain as Peter throws dirt on the grave. Though Josh is not happy with the situation, he cannot turn back now so he plans to head west tomorrow and wait for a sign. Josh makes his way through the crowd to visit his own grave, wondering what Mom thinks if she is watching. He walks down the street behind Beth's house and watches her come outside, wondering if she misses him. She seems more mature and determined, and Josh loves her more than he ever has. He decides to head to Sante Fe tomorrow as he wonders if being Larry had been worth it. He thinks it was, but he had made mistakes by not telling those close to him about his alter-ego. On his way out of town the next day, Josh checks the Boston Globe website for major news and is shocked to find a paternity suit against Josh Swensen from a girl in Idaho. He has never even been to Idaho! Josh hopes it is an isolated event, but it is not. He sleeps in his underground room in the woods and checks the news each morning to find sixteen men claim to be his father. All kinds of conspiracy theories about Larry also surface, and the lies bury what is left of Josh's spirit. He falls into a deep despair as he realizes he can never go back and risk losing his solitude forever. The universe sets it up so that Josh must start over again from scratch so he wanders from town to town, occasionally changing his appearance, and tells himself to get used to his new life.

Without any option of returning to his normal life, Josh's "new vocation was spiritual hobo, never stopping long enough to make a connection" (p. 214). Wondering if there is another choice, he decides to face the music and tell his side of the story. Josh buys an old typewriter and a ream of paper to write his story, hoping to find someone to publish it without dealing with the chaos around Larry. He celebrates the completion of his





manuscript by hitching a ride to Walden Pond since he has never been there, and he feels refreshed and renewed. When the park closes, he makes his way deeper into the woods to the site where Thoreau's house once stood. Tomorrow, he will approach a few writers to help publish his manuscript, but for tonight, he sits under the stars, feeling free. He realizes he will reveal he is still alive by publishing his story, but with the story behind him, Josh can concentrate on what has always been important to him, contributing. Josh died with no last words that may have saved his life instead of hiding behind his screen name. Larry's sermons came from his head, and maybe his heart needs some airtime too. Josh realizes his predicament is actually a blessing; life has given him a second chance to verbalize the things he had left unsaid. He feels Mom's presence more than ever and knows life will go on. Josh can change the world, but he will start with himself this time. As he drifts to sleep, he wonders if this will be an easier or more difficult task.

## Part 6 Analysis

Luke 24:23 and 31 open Part 6 with a reference to not finding a body, still being alive and vanishing from their sight, which is all very applicable to Josh's pseudocide. Josh watches the news coverage concerning his death in order to ensure his safety and belief in his suicide. He is disturbed by Peter's grief but assures himself that the situation is only temporary. Josh alludes to the scene in Mark Twain's TOM SAWYER where Tom and Huck watch their own funeral, comparing this to his own current situation once his death is declared a suicide and a memorial service is scheduled. Josh is disturbed by the multitude of people who attend his memorial service though they do not know him, and his admiration for Beth grows when he sees her confidence and maturity when speaking at his funeral. Though Josh is pained to hurt Peter and Beth, he comforts himself with the idea of returning to his life in a few months. Before he leaves town, though, he decides to visit his gravesite and spend one last night in his underground room, thinking about his mistakes. Unfortunately, he reads the news reports the next day, and he is heartbroken and shocked to find all sorts of reports about himself, Josh Swensen. He falls into a deeper despair as he realizes he can never return to his normal life and must continue as someone else, lest he forfeit his solitude forever. Josh wanders around the country restlessly until he decides to tell his side of the story. He writes a manuscript and finally visits Walden Pond, the former home of his idol Thoreau, to celebrate its completion. He realizes that he will lose his solitude by admitting he is still alive, but he feels it is more important to share his story so that he can focus on contributing to mankind again. Josh realizes life will continue when he feels his mother's presence stronger than ever, and he decides that before changing the world, he must start by changing himself, though this may be a more difficult task.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

The Epilogue quotes Revelation 1:19 about writing what one has seen, as well as "Walden" by Henry David Thoreau about secrets being a part of his nature. Janet Tashjian argues with her editor about publishing Josh's book as fiction under her name, but Josh asks her to do whatever is necessary to get the story out. She helps Josh because it is the right thing to do, but she wishes she had done more. She decides against contacting Peter since it would be a violation of Josh's privacy, and she hopes Peter and Katherine will be happy when she learns that they recently married. Though Janet interviews several people for the Epilogue, she decides not to include them. She really wants to talk to Beth, but she is organizing a rally for Third World workers' rights and will not return to American until after the publication date. One day, Tracy Hawthorne appears at Janet's door because she has heard about the new Larry book being released and feels she deserves to know if he is still alive, but Janet insists she writes fiction, so Tracy drives away. Larry's work influences Janet's life. She whittles down her family's possessions and examines why she is a writer. Recalling a line from Thoreau, "you must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment" (p. 225), Janet realizes she has gone as far as possible with Larry and must move on. She is filled with an uneasy feeling once the book is completed. The last time she sees Josh, he seems happier than anyone she has ever known. Today, she realizes she is ready to begin her next book as she walks through the Arboretum with her son. A plane circles in the sky, spelling out a request for Larry to return, and when her son asks who Larry is, Janet explains he is a boy she once met who "wanted more than anything to help change the world" (p. 226). She and her son look up and watch Larry's name recede into the blank sky.

## Epilogue Analysis

The Epilogue quotes Revelation 1:19 about writing what one has seen which Josh has obviously done. It also quotes Thoreau's "Walden" in which he claims that, like Josh, secrets are part of his nature. Like A Note to the Reader, Janet Tashjian narrates the Epilogue, and she explains why she helps Josh and how she feels about the whole situation. She also provides an update on Peter and Beth for the reader's benefit. [B]ettagold harasses Tashjian when she hears about a book being published regarding Larry, but Tashjian convinces her it is only fiction. Josh's story influences Tashjian's life, but she moves on after realizing she has gone as far as possible with Larry. She describes how happy Josh seemed the last time she had seen him. When a plane spells out a request for Larry to return, Janet explains to her son that Larry is a boy who "wanted more than anything to help change the world" (p. 226). Larry's name recedes into the sky, indicating that Larry will dissipate and perhaps Josh can return to his true identity.



# Characters

## Josh Swensen

Josh Swensen is the protagonist and main character of *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY*. The story is told from his viewpoint. He is 17 years old and lives in Maine with his stepfather, Peter. Josh's mother died three years previously. Josh is in love with his best friend, Beth. In *A Note To The Reader*, Josh approaches Janet Tashjian at the grocery store and asks her to help him publish his manuscript. After reading it, she agrees because she believes his story is important. He disappears again before she can provide him with copies of the published book. Josh agrees to help Beth start a club at school focused on [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com) because he has been in love with her since sixth grade. That night, he prepares fourteen pages of notes for discussion with Beth in preparation for the club, deciding he will help as long as possible provided he can leave the club when it gets too weird. Joining is not usually Josh's thing. Katherine calls him quirky, but the kids at school say he is weird; he is used to it because it has always been that way, but he has never cared what the other kids think. When his mother was alive, she had been a tireless advocate for him and ensured stimulation was high for most of his life with her. Learning excited him as a child, and he had no interest in the usual activities of children. He has always wanted to contribute to making the world a better place, and his highest priority is to push civilization forward with more ideas and more meaning. Josh is irritated with Beth's infatuation with Todd, a cretin jock at their high school, and her romantic relationship with Todd causes many arguments between Josh and Beth. Since Josh knows his deceased mother better than Peter, he visits her somewhere that captures her spirit better than the cemetery, the make-up counter at Bloomingdale's. Josh communicates with Mom and receives his response by listening for the next words that someone says. At the end of Part 1, Josh mentions that he has forgotten to tell Beth that he is Larry. Josh creates Larry's website out of boredom, his need to rebel and as a distraction from his grief after his mother's death. He worries when betagold threatens to learn and reveal Larry's identity since he fears being discovered to be Larry. With the increased popularity of Larry's website, the Larry study group at Josh's school focuses on preserving Larry's message in the midst of the consumerism beginning to surround his website, so Josh and Beth post flyers promoting anti-consumerism throughout the mall. After this venture, Josh leaves to spend three days in the isolation of nature where he enjoys himself immensely and wonders whether he could become a hermit and reject culture.

When Josh returns from his nature excursion in Part 3, he learns that Bono has planned a music festival called Larryfest. Josh is excited, though betagold continues to threaten to find and reveal his true identity. Josh enjoys himself at Larryfest, and his relationship with Beth seems to take a more romantic turn, nearly causing him to confess that he is Larry. In Part 4, the discovery that Josh is, indeed, Larry changes Josh's life forever. The media does not care about Larry's message, and the increased traffic is too much for his website to handle, forcing him to shut it down.



Though Josh cannot kill himself, he comes across the word "pseudocide" in an online dictionary and begins to play with the idea of faking his own suicide. Josh spends six weeks planning his pseudocide in Part 5, though he does not actually intend to follow through with the plan. He spends three days on a vision quest when he realizes that he is considering the crazy scheme, during which he decides to attempt the act. Josh parks his bike on Sagamore Bridge, throws his clothes in the river and dons his disguise as Gil Jackson. Gil Jackson reports seeing a young man matching Josh's description jump from the bridge before vanishing himself. Josh watches the news reports to ensure no one suspects he is still alive. He is saddened by Peter and Beth's grief as he watches his memorial service, but he comforts himself with the idea of returning in several months after the media frenzy surrounding Larry dies down; unfortunately, fatherhood accusations and conspiracy theories about Josh/Larry force him to realize he can never return to his normal life. After wandering around the country for a while, Josh decides to share his side of the story, so he writes his manuscript and searches for an author to help him publish it.

## Beth

Beth is Josh's best friend with whom he has been in love with since sixth grade. In Part 1, Josh agrees to help Beth form a school study group based on Larry's website about anti-consumerism which is written by an anonymous author. Josh is bothered by the fact that Beth is dating Todd when she is so committed to her own personal development, and this leads to an argument between the friends. Though they are reconciled, Josh forgets to mention to Beth that he is Larry. After Larry publishes a sermon about recognizing worthless relationships, Beth breaks up with Todd; like several of his sermons, this sermon focuses on a veiled account of the relationship between Josh and Beth. With the increased popularity of Larry's website, the Larry study group at Josh's school focuses on preserving Larry's message in the midst of the consumerism beginning to surrounding his website, so Josh and Beth post flyers promoting anti-consumerism throughout the mall.

When Josh returns from his nature excursion in Part 3, Beth tells him that Bono has planned a music festival called Larryfest. Beth and Josh attend Larryfest together, and their relationship seems to take a more romantic turn, nearly causing him to confess that he is Larry. Several days after the festival, Beth visits Josh, and as they flirt, he nearly tells her that he is Larry; however, he kisses her instead, and when she tells him that she has reconciled with Todd, Josh gets angry and kicks her out of his house. Since the media is outside of Josh's house, Beth returns, just in time to hear betagold accuse Josh of being Larry. After avoiding Josh for some time, Beth insists that she can no longer be friends with Josh since friendship is based on honesty and he has been living a lie. She eulogizes Josh at his memorial service, claiming that he was a private person and would hate the circus that his funeral has become. Janet Tashjian really wants to interview Beth for the Epilogue to the book, but Beth is organizing a rally for Third World workers' rights and will not return to America until after the publication date. Though she has moved on from Larry, she has not moved on from his message because it is partially her own.



## Janet Tashjian

Janet Tashjian is the author of *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY*, but she plays a role as a character in *A Note To The Reader* and the Epilogue as she claims the novel has been given to her by a young man and is not a work of her own imagination. While in line at the grocery store, Janet Tashjian, the author, is approached by a young man who offers her a bundle of papers, claiming he has a great story for her. Instead of taking the bundle, she tells him there are lots of great publishing houses and recommends he start in New York as she continues loading groceries in her car, but he claims his book must get published even though he is not supposed to be here. Janet agrees to read his manuscript, and as she skims the manuscript on her way home, she realizes why he looks familiar and races back to the store to find that he is already gone. By the time he calls the next day, Janet has already read the entire manuscript. Though she is working on another project, she feels his story is important and needs to be published, and Christy, her editor, is interested in publishing the manuscript as soon as she reads it. The Epilogue is Janet's idea to add a different perspective. While working on Josh's book, Janet finds it inspirational at times, but at other times, it seems eerie and devoid of meaning. Janet talks to Josh for the last time a few months prior to the publication, when her editor mails her the galleys, and she points out that if his book is published, people will know he is alive and the whole mess will start up again, but Josh feels it is important for him to be honest right now. Later, Janet tries to reach Josh to give him copies of his book, but he has disappeared again.

In the Epilogue, Janet Tashjian argues with her editor about publishing Josh's book as fiction under her name, but Josh asks her to do whatever is necessary to get the story out. She helps Josh because it is the right thing to do, but she wishes she had done more. She decides against contacting Peter since it would be a violation of Josh's privacy, and she hopes Peter and Katherine will be happy when she learns that they recently married. Though Janet interviews several people for the Epilogue, she decides not to include them. She really wants to talk to Beth, but she is organizing a rally for Third World workers' rights and will not return to American until after the publication date. One day, Tracy Hawthorne appears at Janet's door because she heard about the new Larry book being released and feels she deserves to know if he is still alive, but Janet insists she writes fiction, so Tracy drives away. Larry's work influences Janet's life. She whittles down her family's possessions and examines why she is a writer. Recalling a line from Thoreau, "You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment" (p. 225), Janet realizes she has gone as far as possible with Larry and must move on. She is filled with an uneasy feeling once the book is completed. The last time she sees Josh, he seems happier than anyone she has ever known. Today, she realizes she is ready to begin her next book as she walks through the Arboretum with her son. A plane circles in the sky, spelling out a request for Larry to return, and when her son asks who Larry is, Janet explains he is a boy she once met who "wanted more than anything to help change the world" (p. 226). She and her son look up and watch Larry's name recede into the blank sky.



## Larry

Larry is Josh's alter ego and the anonymous author of [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com), a popular website about anti-consumerism. When Bono from U2 discovers Larry's website and releases a song pertaining to anti-consumerism, the popularity of the site increases rapidly. After Larry publishes a sermon about recognizing worthless relationships, Beth breaks up with Todd; like several of his sermons, this sermon focuses on a veiled account of the relationship between Josh and Beth. Betagold begins harassing Larry, insisting that he reveal his identity and threatening to discover it regardless of his agreement, and this worries Josh who fears being discovered to be Larry. Fans are divided with a large portion desiring to know who Larry is and the rest content with his anonymity. With the increased popularity of Larry's website, the Larry study group at Josh's school focuses on preserving Larry's message in the midst of the consumerism beginning to surround his website. Larry publishes a sermon about the joys of spending time alone in nature while Josh is on a nature excursion for three days. Bono plans Larryfest, a rock festival, in Larry's honor to promote the message of anti-consumerism. After betagold reveals that Josh is Larry, the media attention leads to Larry becoming a product, and unfortunately, products get consumed.

## Peter

Peter is Josh's stepfather. He is an advertising executive and does not like Larry whom he feels bashes his culture. Peter is very angry with Josh when he learns that Josh is Larry, but he is heart-broken when he believes Josh has committed suicide. Peter dates Katherine, a somewhat vapid woman, and they marry after Josh's "suicide."

## Katherine

Katherine is Peter's girlfriend who Josh feels is annoying and boring. Katherine marries Peter after Josh fakes his suicide.

## Todd

Todd is Beth's boyfriend during part of the narrative, but he does not appreciate her. Josh is jealous of his peer to whom he refers as a cretin. Beth dates Todd because he is the coolest guy who has ever liked her and she wants his popularity to rub off on her for a while.

## betagold

betagold is Larry's anonymous nemesis. betagold constantly threatens to discover and reveal Larry's identity, frightening Josh. She claims the world deserves to know who Larry really is. Tracy Hawthorne, the older lady to whom Josh had given his toothbrush





during Larryfest, appears at Josh's door a few days after Larryfest and reveals that she is betagold. She arrives with the media who ruin Josh's life by demolishing his revered solitude.

## **Gil Jackson**

Gil Jackson is the alias Josh uses immediately after faking his suicide. After throwing his clothes in the water, Josh disguises himself as Gil and reports seeing a young man, matching Josh's description, jump from the bridge. Gil then disappears because he is heading to Los Angeles.

## **Mom**

Josh's mother has been dead for three years. Josh was very close with Mom, and he still misses her greatly. He feels her essence is strongest at Bloomingdale's, so this is where he goes to visit her. In order to communicate with Mom, Josh talks to her and takes what is next said by someone nearby as her response. Based on this method, Mom seems to encourage Josh's work with Larry in the beginning of the novel, but after Josh is revealed to be Larry and his life falls apart, he loses his connection with Mom. After faking his death and writing his manuscript, Josh feels Mom's essence the strongest he has ever felt it when he celebrates by visiting the homesite of Thoreau at Walden Pond.



# Objects/Places

## Maine

Maine is where Josh lives with his stepfather, Peter, and this is the main setting of the novel.

## Peter's House

Josh lives in Peter's house, and this is where he writes most of Larry's sermons, in the basement. This is also where Beth rebuffs him when he kisses her. Betagold confronts Josh about being Larry at Peter's house which enables the paparazzi to stalk him there.

## Larry's Website

Josh anonymously writes and runs a popular website, [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com), under the pseudonym Larry. On the site, he writes against consumerism and commercialism through many sermons. He also begins posting pictures of his few possessions when his readers question his identity. The website becomes extremely popular after Bono from U2 comes across it which eventually leads to Larryfest. Unfortunately, betagold, Larry's equally anonymous nemesis, is determined to learn Larry's identity, and when she does so, Josh is overwhelmed by media coverage. Even worse, he has to shut the website down since he cannot handle the traffic it is receiving.

## Larryfest

Larryfest is a rock festival against communism organized by Bono from U2 and held in a field in Maine. Josh attends with Beth and is overwhelmed by the many people of various age groups who also attend the concert. Betagold sets up a booth at Larryfest with a petition requesting Larry to reveal his identity. This is where Josh gives his toothbrush to an older woman who loses hers, and this woman turns out to be betagold, his nemesis.

## Bloomingdale's

Bloomingdale's is where Josh goes to the make-up counter to communicate with his deceased mother since he feels it captures her essence better than the cemetery does.





## Mom's Tombstone

When Josh and Peter visit Mom's grave on the third anniversary of her death, Josh is disturbed to see his name and birth year added to her tombstone which Peter ordered since Mom always assumed Josh would want to be buried with her. It is even more disconcerting for Josh to see the year of his death added to the tombstone after his pseudocide.

## Larry Club

Josh helps Beth start a Larry Club at their school to help spread Larry's message. It is awkward since he is actually Larry. As Larry's website becomes more popular, membership in the club swells, and they work hard to prevent Larry's message from being lost in the wave of consumerism surrounding his website.

## Larry's Items

Larry only possesses seventy-five items, and when people begin questioning his identity, he posts one or a few of his items at a time to aid his readers in discovering his identity; however, these items tend to be very nondescript and unhelpful in identifying the author of the website.

## Underground Room

Josh spends a lot of time digging an underground room in the nature preserve behind the cemetery where his mother is buried. This is where he goes to think. He also writes a sermon about fake friends in his underground room when Beth cancels plans with him to see Todd. Additionally, Josh hides in his underground room shortly after his pseudocide in order to check the news stories about his involvement in conspiracies and such.

## Pseudocide

After being discovered as Larry, Josh plans a pseudocide to escape the media attention. He fakes his own suicide but plans to return to his old life in several months. Unfortunately, he quickly realizes this is impossible when conspiracy theories surface about both Josh and Larry.



# Themes

## Identity

Arguably the most important theme in *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY* is that of identity as Josh assumes an alter ego, Larry, and this situation comprises the majority of the narrative. In *A Note To The Reader*, Janet Tashjian warns Josh that people will realize he is still alive if he publishes his manuscript, but Josh believes it is important to share his side of the story. In Part 1, Josh discusses Larry's website, noting that the author is anonymous. Josh identifies himself as a loner who is thought of as weird by his peers. Though Beth realizes that Todd does not appreciate her, she dates him because she desires to improve her social status. At the end of the first part, Josh admits that he is Larry. Josh invents Larry because his privacy is important plus, "He was the perfect alter ego for a loner like me- outspoken and opinionated. He didn't need to bury himself in a privacy cocoon, like good old Josh" (p. 86). One aspect that is awkward is being unable to take credit for Larry's website since Larry's identity is supposed to remain anonymous. Throughout the text, Josh frequently differentiates between Larry and himself. When betagold presses Larry to reveal his identity and threatens to learn who he is, Larry responds "As I told you before, I feel my identity only gets in the way of my work. If I tell people who come to this site that I'm black or a college professor or a retired businessman, suddenly everything I say gets filtered through that. Some people might choose not to hear the thoughts of someone from a certain demographic. How about concentrating on what I have to say instead of the measley identity of the writer?" (p. 68).

Though signs of death point toward Larry dying, Josh is unwilling to relinquish his alter ego because Larry's work is not yet completed. The desire to identify Larry increases with the influx of visitors to his website after Bono from U2 discovers the website, and even Beth wonders who Larry is. At Larryfest, betagold sets up a booth with a petition for Larry to reveal his identity. Josh nearly tells Beth that he is Larry at Larryfest and again at his house, but he kisses her at his house which leads to a fight. After fighting with Beth, Josh is accosted by betagold who arrives with the media to reveal Larry's identity. Josh's life changes drastically after this revelation. His friendship with Beth ends since he had been living a lie. Josh comes up with a plan, "Pseudocide. A way to start again as someone else, to burn the old self and try on a new one. It's not like I was doing the world any good being Josh OR Larry these days" (p. 177). Josh plans to fake his suicide to escape the media attention surrounding Larry, and to do so, he assumes the identity of Gil Jackson who reports seeing a young man jump from the bridge. Josh questions why he was not content to just be himself. After realizing that he cannot return to his normal life, Josh wonders, "Was it worth it? If I had Larry to do all over again, would I? These were questions I asked myself often and still wasn't sure about the answers. But was the whole thing worth losing myself over, even temporarily? I think it was. I'd made mistakes, of course; caring more about my message than about the people in my life. Next time out I'd try to find a better balance. There were other lessons



too; I just hadn't learned them yet" (p. 208-209). Ultimately, Josh realizes that his biggest mistake was not just being himself.

## Anti-Consumerism

Larry's message on his website is anti-consumerism, and as such, this is a major theme in this novel. From living with an advertising executive for five years, Josh learns that his website needs a niche, either a message or a product. He cannot sell a product since he is non-materialistic and actually owns only seventy-five possessions. He trades CDs and books for new ones and rents skis and other items. He has been like this "since eighth grade when [he] read about some Native Americans not wanting to leave too many 'footprints' on the earth when they left" (page 46). Every purchase is a major decision because it must be worth removing something else from his possessions. Deciding to write about what he knows, anti-consumerism, Josh decides, "Larry's mission statement would be to take on waste and overspending and cultural brainwashing" (p. 47). Larry writes Sermon 113 which complains about people who are his best friend until someone better comes along, insisting that social climbing is as bad as people climbing up the corporate ladder. He is tired of accepting people back when their new friends reject them. In Sermon 137, Larry discusses the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Half of the six billion people on the planet live on less than two dollars each day. Nature is going to mutiny one day because of how poorly mankind has treated it. "We're not fit to live in the world anymore; we're tourists, clear-cutting our way across the planet till nothing's left" (page 65). Over the next several weeks, Josh begins to see the effect that Larry is having on the rest of the nation as kids across the country reject commercialism.

At 2 a.m. one morning, Josh picks the lock to Peter's briefcase and finds extremely confidential future ad campaigns aimed at the lucrative youth market. Josh scans the report onto his hard drive and puts the original back in Peter's briefcase. He sits up all night, rearranging the ads into mock-ads which he posts on Larry's website, hoping for a reaction. By breakfast, two hundred and sixty-seven people respond, and some even post their own versions of the ads. This makes Josh feel closer to Peter since he is "following in his footsteps in a subversive, anticonsumer way" (page 72). Sermon 163 discusses the waste that results from the consumption of celebrities. As Larry's website becomes more popular, the Larry study group at Josh's school discusses how to ensure Larry's message does not get lost in his increasing popularity. One of their pseudo ads points out that "WHOEVER DIES WITH THE MOST STUFF IS STILL COMPLETELY, DE FACTO DEAD" (p. 95). Josh is very excited when Beth tells him that Bono has organized a rock festival to be held in Maine as a gathering of anti-consumerism, and he calls it Larryfest! Sermon 271 questions if Larryfest is possible; "Can it be done? Hundreds of thousands of people coming together to celebrate being free of corporate advertising and greed? Rejoicing in not being consumer puppets, spending our hard-earned money on stuff we don't need just so a few fat cats can get rich? Can we do it without violence, without anger? Can girls and women feel safe and respected? Can we do it without product endorsements? Can differences of opinion be tolerated, even celebrated? I don't know. I guess we'll find out. See you there. Love, Larry. P. S. I'll be



the guy with the T-shirt and the smile" (p. 118). Sermon 272 claims they did it with idealism and without corporate endorsements, though no one said they could. "Change the world? Did. Are. Can" (p. 129). After betagold reveals that Josh is Larry, Josh notes that there are some positive aspects to his secret pseudonym being discovered, such as talking to Bono and activists from Amnesty International about the World Bank strategy, plus Josh no longer worries about giving Larry away. Unfortunately, the media does not care about Larry's message. Josh notes the irony of Larry's rants against consuming the lives of celebrities as his life becomes tabloid material. "Larry was now, officially, a product. And you know what happens to products. They get consumed" (p. 150).

## Relationships

One important theme in *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY* is that of relationships. Josh's relationships play a key role in his actions and thoughts. The most important relationship in the novel is between Josh and Beth. They are best friends, but Josh has been in love with Beth since sixth grade. He is irritated that she dates Todd, and this causes several arguments between them. Larry's Sermon 97 talks about whether relationships are meaningful, and Beth says she is done with Todd and is going to focus on important things now, like the Larry club. After Josh admits to the reader that he is Larry, he complains "it was a Catch-22. I was happy that what I did was interesting to others, but because Larry's identity was unknown, I couldn't take any credit for the phenomenon, couldn't use it on my resume, or more importantly, brag about it to someone like Beth. I could, I suppose, but there's something pretty slimy about a philosopher seeking attention for personal gain" (p. 43). At Larryfest, their relationship seems to become a bit more romantic as they hold hands, but after they return home, Josh kisses Beth instead of telling her that he is Larry. He kicks her out when she confesses that she is dating Todd again. Beth is furious when she learns that Josh is Larry, and she ends the friendship because, "Friendship is based on honesty. And let's face it, you were living a giant lie" (p. 164).

The other important relationship in Josh's life is with his stepfather, Peter. Peter disapproves of Josh's involvement with the Larry website before learning that Josh is Larry. They have several arguments about it. When Josh publishes pseudo ads on Larry's website, he feels closer to Peter, like he is following in his stepfather's footsteps in a subversive, anti-consumer way. Josh is also very close to his mother, though she has been deceased for three years. In order to communicate with Mom, Josh talks to her and takes what is next said by someone nearby as her response. Based on this method, Mom seems to encourage Josh's work with Larry in the beginning of the novel, but after Josh is revealed to be Larry and his life falls apart, he loses his connection with Mom. After faking his death and writing his manuscript, Josh feels Mom's essence the strongest he has ever felt it when he celebrates by visiting the home site of Thoreau at Walden Pond. Larry has an antagonistic relationship with the equally anonymous betagold who eventually reveals that Josh is Larry, ruining Josh's normal life. After faking his death, Josh wonders, "Was it worth it? If I had Larry to do all over again, would I? These were questions I asked myself often and still wasn't sure about the



answers. But was the whole thing worth losing myself over, even temporarily? I think it was. I'd made mistakes, of course; caring more about my message than about the people in my life. Next time out I'd try to find a better balance. There were other lessons too; I just hadn't learned them yet" (p. 208-209). He wishes he had been more honest with the people in his life and decides that maybe he needs to allow his heart to dictate some of his actions, instead of just his head.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this book is first person throughout, though the actual narrator varies from Janet Tashjian to Josh to Larry. The point of view is limited and reliable, and this is proven by the fact that Josh can only share his own thoughts and feelings. While he conjectures as to the feelings and thoughts of other characters, he cannot speak of them with any real authority. This point of view is important to the novel's plot because Josh writes his manuscript with the goal of sharing his side of the story, and by writing from his own perspective, he manages to do so. Janet Tashjian introduces and ends the narrative by insisting that Josh's story is his own, not a work of her imagination.

The novel is written using approximately seventy-five percent exposition, with the remainder of the story being told through dialogue. The exposition portion also includes emails and sermons posted on Larry's website. This distribution is very important since it allows the narrative to focus on why Josh invented Larry and the repercussions of his actions with his personal life taking a secondary role in the actual story as it apparently did in his life. The viewpoint of the story alternates between Janet Tashjian, Josh and Larry. Janet Tashjian's viewpoint is dominant in A Note To The Reader and the Epilogue, Larry's viewpoint is seen in his sermons and emails, and Josh's viewpoint possesses the remainder and majority of the novel. Though Josh is Larry, his alter ego definitely has his own viewpoint because Larry is much more opinionated and vocal than Josh is comfortable being.

## Setting

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY is set in the real world, predominantly in Maine where Josh lives. The characters are mostly other students who attend Josh's school and fans of Larry's website. It is significant that Larry's message is against consumerism because Peter, Josh's stepfather, is an advertising executive. Betagold is also an important character who is Larry's nemesis and is eventually revealed to be an older woman. The characters are all middle-class Americans, yet Josh, as Larry, rants against poverty in Third World countries in his sermons against consumerism.

Maine is where Josh lives with his stepfather, Peter, and this is the main setting of the novel. Josh lives in Peter's house, and this is where he writes most of Larry's sermons, in the basement. This is also where Beth rebuffs him when he kisses her. Betagold confronts Josh about being Larry at Peter's house which enables the paparazzi to stalk him there. Josh anonymously writes and runs a popular website, [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com), under the pseudonym Larry. On the site, he writes against consumerism and commercialism through many sermons. He also begins posting pictures of his few possessions when his readers question his identity. The website becomes extremely popular after Bono from U2 comes across it which



eventually leads to Larryfest. Unfortunately, betagold, Larry's equally anonymous nemesis, is determined to learn Larry's identity, and when she does so, Josh is overwhelmed by media coverage. Even worse, he has to shut the website down since he cannot handle the traffic it is receiving. Larryfest is a rock festival against communism organized by Bono from U2 and held in a field in Maine. Josh attends with Beth and is overwhelmed by the many people of various age groups who also attend the concert. Betagold sets up a booth at Larryfest with a petition requesting Larry to reveal his identity. This is where Josh gives his toothbrush to an older woman who loses hers, and this woman turns out to be betagold, his nemesis. Bloomingdale's is where Josh goes to the make-up counter to communicate with his deceased mother since he feels it captures her essence better than the cemetery does. When Josh and Peter visit Mom's grave on the third anniversary of her death, Josh is disturbed to see his name and birth year added to hers which Peter ordered since Mom always assumed Josh would want to be buried with her. It is even more disconcerting for Josh to see the year of his death added to the tombstone after his pseudocide. Josh spends a lot of time digging an underground room in the nature preserve behind the cemetery where his mother is buried. This is where he goes to think. He also writes a sermon about fake friends in his underground room when Beth cancels plans with him to see Todd. Additionally, Josh hides in his underground room shortly after his pseudocide in order to check the news stories about his involvement in conspiracies and such.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is casual and informal, making it very easy to understand. This is appropriate since the manuscript is supposedly written by an American teenaged boy. It also is written using proper grammar which demonstrates Josh's intelligence. The construction of the narrative also aids comprehension because it is written in the form of a term paper with Biblical quotes, Larry's sermons, photographs and footnotes added as applicable.

The language characterizes the narrator, Josh, showing him to be an educated and thoughtful young man, though he is often confused about his identity, his relationships and his place in the world overall. The novel is written using approximately three-quarters exposition and one-quarter dialogue, and this allows the focus to remain on Josh, his actions, his thoughts, and the repercussions thereto. The language aids the writing style since Josh adds any appropriate tangents into his footnotes to prevent intruding into the narrative itself. The sermons characterize Larry, Josh's alter ego, and his anti-consumerist beliefs. Eventually, these two personae are reconciled and revealed to be the same person. Overall, the language used in this novel is very easy to understand and is successful in characterizing the narrator and emphasizing the main themes presented within the narrative.





## Structure

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY is separated into six parts with an introduction entitled A Note To The Reader and an Epilogue. It contains 227 pages. A Note To The Reader consists of 4 pages, Part 1 contains 34 pages, Part 2 contains 69 pages, and Part 4 is comprised of 34 pages. Part 5 is only 18 pages long, Part 6 consists of 24 pages, and the Epilogue contains only 6 pages. The parts of the novel are numbered, rather than titled, but they are prefaced by a Biblical quote pertaining to the contents of each part. The six actual parts of the narrative tend to be fairly long, though A Note To The Reader and the Epilogue are quite short. Each section is quite detailed and encompasses a period of time ranging from several days to several months, all of which total somewhere between six months and a year.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY by Janet Tashjian is the story of a young man who wants to change the world, written as though the author encounters the young man and publishes his manuscript, rather than creating the story herself. Josh creates a website under the pseudonym of Larry, his alter ego, to contribute to the fight against consumerism. When the website becomes popular, Josh's anonymity is compromised, causing his life to turn upside down. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LARRY is an entertaining and informative account of the struggles of a young man whose desire to improve the world is inhibited by the world's consumerism. The novel is fairly quick-paced and easy to read. The narrative is conveyed linearly, though it is all told as past events from a time in the future of when they occurred as Josh reflects on the past. Overall, this novel is very entertaining and enjoyable to read.



## Quotes

"It's really important for me to be honest right now. I just want to write about the truth."  
Josh, A Note to the Reader, page x

"Joining anything was not my usual thing- by a long shot... I don't know about you, but if 50 million people are doing something, I want to be doing something else- big time."  
Josh, Part 1, page 15

"It's very simple, really. I've only wanted one thing my whole life- to contribute, to help make the world a better place. It sounds amazingly corny, but pushing civilization forward has always been my highest priority. Not with more technology, not with more money, but with more ideas, more meaning. When we studied Darwin last year, his ideas burned off the page. All of us, evolving, moving forward, consciously or not. It's probably what was in the back of my mind when I moved those plastic numbers across the refrigerator; it's what's on my mind as I type this now. If Larry was a way to delve into life's deeper meaning, then count me in." Josh, Part 1, pages 18-19

"I just feel like I'm waiting for my life to begin, that I've wasted seventeen years." Josh, Part 1, page 27

"And oh yeah, Beth, one more thing. Did I forget to mention I was Larry? (I'm not much of a detail person.)" Josh, Part 1, page 37

"It was a Catch-22. I was happy that what I did was interesting to others, but because Larry's identity was unknown, I couldn't take any credit for the phenomenon, couldn't use it on my resume, or more importantly, brag about it to someone like Beth. I could, I suppose, but there's something pretty slimy about a philosopher seeking attention for personal gain." Josh, Part 2, page 43

"Larry's mission statement would be to take on waste and overspending and cultural brainwashing." Josh, Part 2, page 47

"We're not fit to live in the world anymore; we're tourists, clear-cutting our way across the planet till nothing's left." Sermon 137, Part 2, page 65

"As I told you before, I feel my identity only gets in the way of my work. If I tell people who come to this site that I'm black or a college professor or a retired businessman, suddenly everything I say gets filtered through that. Some people might choose not to hear the thoughts of someone from a certain demographic. How about concentrating on what I have to say instead of the measley identity of the writer?" Larry, Part 2, page 68

"There were a dozen reasons to stop, and the rational part of me knew every one verbatim... I knew a boatload of reasons wouldn't make me stop being Larry. He was the perfect alter ego for a loner like me- outspoken and opinionated. He didn't need to bury himself in a privacy cocoon, like good old Josh." Josh, Part 2, page 86



"WHOEVER DIES WITH THE MOST STUFF IS STILL COMPLETELY, DE FACTO DEAD." Pseudo ad, Part 2, page 95

"We are meant to be alone in Nature. The word lonely never comes up." Sermon 213, Part 2, page 108

"Can it be done? Hundreds of thousands of people coming together to celebrate being free of corporate advertising and greed? Rejoicing in not being consumer puppets, spending our hard-earned money on stuff we don't need just so a few fat cats can get rich? Can we do it without violence, without anger? Can girls and women feel safe and respected? Can we do it without product endorsements? Can differences of opinion be tolerated, even celebrated? I don't know. I guess we'll find out. See you there. Love, Larry. P. S. I'll be the guy with the T-shirt and the smile." Sermon 271, Part 3, page 118

"[Larry] probably hopes betagold will just go away." Josh, Part 3, page 125

"Mom, could you ever in a million years have imagined it? The world is shifting, the consciousness is changing, we're evolving in the right direction." Josh, Part 3, page 128

"No more thinking about quitting. In hindsight, I should have quit, of course. Closed down the Web site after Larryfest, its greatest success. But I didn't. I committed myself even further. I asked myself the eternal question. Fight or flight? It wasn't a decision." Josh, Part 3, page 133

"Yeah, we've sold them the idea of the American dream, and now they're going to drop dead working till they get it." Josh, Part 3, page 138

"I have a newfound respect for Alice for still being able to function after stepping through the looking glass. When betagold entered our house, it was as if someone reached down the the wall outlet and yanked out the plug connecting my life to anything resembling reality... And the media- poking, prodding, changing my life forever. Josh Swensen died that day. I just didn't know it yet." Josh, Part 4, page 147

"All the hours I'd spent honing those sermons and creating those pseudo ads were gone. All anyone cared about now was what kind of breakfast cereal I preferred. Larry was the new Pokemon, the new Beanie Baby, the new Sony PlayStation. Larry was now, officially, a product. And you know what happens to products. They get consumed." Josh, Part 4, page 150

"Look, friendship is based on honesty. And let's face it, you were living a giant lie." Beth, Part 4, page 164

"Trapped. Bored. Misunderstood. Overanalyzed. Hated. Worshipped. Friendless. And worst of all- noncontributing. I had to get out of here." Josh, Part 4, page 171

"Pseudocide. A way to start again as someone else, to burn the old self and try on a new one. It's not like I was doing the world any good being Josh OR Larry these days." Josh, Part 4, page 177



"My death became the act I'd been rehearsing for my whole life." Josh, Part 5, page 183

"I should be able to move around the nation undisturbed, my precious solitude returned. Being able to be just Josh again would be worth it. Technically, I couldn't be Josh, of course, but being anyone these days was better than being Josh OR Larry." Josh, Part 5, page 185

"I chanted Larry's words in my head like a mantra-BE THE HERO OF YOUR OWN LIFE, BE THE HERO OF YOUR OWN LIFE. It was nice to have advice from somebody you trusted." Josh, Part 5, page 187

"Given Peter's testimony about my bike rides to the Cape and how miserable I'd been, the detectives finally gave up trying to find Gil. The last person to see Josh alive was as fictitious a character as Larry himself." Josh, Part 6, page 202

"I wasn't happy with the situation, but I couldn't turn back now. The next day I would check out, head west for a while, and do what all pilgrims do. Wait for a sign." Josh, Part 6, page 205

"Images, memories, thoughts- they were the only real possessions any of us had anyway." Josh, Part 6, page 207

"Was it worth it? If I had Larry to do all over again, would I? These were questions I asked myself often and still wasn't sure about the answers. But was the whole thing worth losing myself over, even temporarily? I think it was. I'd made mistakes, of course; caring more about my message than about the people in my life. Next time out I'd try to find a better balance. There were other lessons too; I just hadn't learned them yet." Josh, Part 6, pages 208-209

"I laughed- hysterically- at the first several theories, but soon the weight of the lies buried what was left of my spirit. I had started out writing sermons about the toxic effects of celebrity worship and accumulation; never in my wildest dreams could I have envisioned that my prophecies could be magnified a thousand times. I had tried to warn others; I should have warned myself." Josh, Part 6, pages 212-213

"Like my new life, it took some getting used to, but once accepted, made me feel refreshed and renewed." Josh, Part 6, page 216

"I had 'died' with no last words, words that maybe could have saved my life. If I had told Beth how I felt about her from the beginning instead of having Larry seduce her like some kind of cyber-Cyrano de Bergerac. If I had really tried to discuss my anticonsumer views with Peter. Even more to the point, if I had told him that never in fifty lifetimes could I feel for Katherine what I felt for my mom, that her petty interests made a mockery of all the things Mom had held important. If I had told people straight out- I like you, you're fine, but COULD YOU PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE FOR A WHILE, instead of hiding behind a screen name. All Larry's sermons came from his head. Maybe his heart- my heart- needed some airtime too." Josh, Part 6, page 218



"Larry's work continues to influence my life in different ways... I reexamine the reasons I'm a writer, begin an inner dialogue. Am I writing to express myself, to add ideas to the collective thought process? Or am I just out to sell books and get famous? I go back and forth, decide not to put my photo on the jacket of the book." Janet Tashjian, Epilogue, pages 224-225

"I tell him Larry was a boy I met once. He did yoga, loved numbers, and wanted more than anything to help change the world." Janet Tashjian, Epilogue, page 226



## Topics for Discussion

Why does Josh invent Larry, and how does he see Larry?

Describe the relationship between Josh and Beth.

Who is betagold, and why does Josh fear her?

Why is Larryfest significant?

What happens to Josh when the world learns he is Larry?

Why does Josh fake his own death? Does he make the right decision?

Given the lengths to which Josh goes in order to vanish from the public eye, why do you think he decides to publish his manuscript and risk discovery of the fact that he is still alive?