

The Graduation of Jake Moon Study Guide

The Graduation of Jake Moon by Barbara Park

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Graduation of Jake Moon Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 and 2.....	5
Chapters 3 and 4.....	7
Chapters 5 and 6.....	9
Chapters 7 and 8.....	12
Chapters 9 and 10.....	14
Chapters 11 and 12.....	16
Chapter 12.....	18
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	24
Themes.....	26
Style.....	28
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

This novel for young adults is mainly a first person narrative of how a middle school graduate comes to terms with the illness of his much loved grandfather. As Jake Moon struggles with the pressures of having to take care of the man who once took care of him, as well as the resentments that come along with those pressures, the narrative also explores themes relating to the necessity for going past surface impressions and the struggle of dealing with change.

The novel begins with a third person description of three teenage boys taunting an old man - or rather, one teenage boy watching two others taunt an old man. At the end of the first chapter, the narrative shifts into first person, as the narrator reveals that he is the third boy ... and that the old man is his grandfather.

The next few chapters are an extended flashback, and narrate how the boy, Jake, and the old man, Skelly, come to be in that initial situation, Jake having been raised by a single mom in his grandfather's home and having been encouraged and supported by him. He also describes how Skelly develops Alzheimer's disease, which slowly destroys a person's memory and ability to function properly. Jake comments on his increasing resentment at having to take more and more time to take care of Skelly and his resulting struggles to have a life outside of home and school. Also in this flashback section, Jake describes how the family is helped with Skelly's care by two nurses - the no-nonsense Lanna, whose own troubles at home are a significant part of why she eventually decides to leave, and the eccentric Mrs. Russell, who clearly cares for Skelly and his family. As the narrative returns to the present with an encounter at the dumpster, the arrival of Mrs. Russell disrupts the taunting of the other boys, and makes Jake feel even worse for standing by and doing nothing.

As Skelly's condition deteriorates, Jake's difficulties in finding a balance between his home and private lives worsen, particularly as the result of his tense relationship with his cousin James and resentment of James' mother, the wealthy Aunt Marguerite who, according to Jake, simply writes checks to pay for Mrs. Russell instead of actually caring. Jake's mom, however, takes him sharply to task for having this opinion, and reminds him that the situation is a struggle for everybody. Shortly afterward, as Jake is preparing for his eighth grade graduation, Skelly goes on an outing with Mrs. Russell and disappears. Jake and his family spend an anxious forty eight hours waiting for him to come home, becoming quite frightened when a cap that Skelly might have been wearing is found near a lake in a park. Shortly after the police reveal that there is no sign of Skelly in the lake, a confrontation between Jake and James makes Jake realize that he is not the only teenage male in the family who worries about his grandfather. That night, Jake and James are sitting outside when Skelly is brought home by a friendly cab driver. Coming so close to losing him, Jake comments, makes him change his mind; he had originally planned to not invite Skelly to his graduation out of fear of any embarrassing situation that might occur. After Skelly comes home, however, Jake arranges for him to attend the graduation.



On the night of graduation, while Jake is sitting with the rest of his graduating class, a misunderstanding between the other members of his family results in Skelly being left on his own, becoming disoriented, making his way to the stage, and being grabbed by security. Jake rushes to help him, and is soon rejoined by the rest of the family, who take Skelly outside while Jake goes through with the ceremony. As soon as he gets his diploma, Jake rejoins his family and they drive home, with Jake imagining that his grandfather is saying the same words of support and affection that he had used when Jake had been little.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

"The Twist:"

Present tense, third person narration describes how three teenage boys, on their way home from school, see an old man standing on the edge of a dumpster. Two of the boys taunt him, but the third just watches. The old man doesn't respond, instead climbing down into the dumpster, turning to the boys, and waving a greeting to them. At that point, narration comments, the fun of teasing the old man stops. Narration also comments that, "If you happened to be passing by and you saw this whole thing going on, you'd probably think that the third kid was the good kid." But then narration, shifting into first person, points out "the twist;" the third kid is Jake, the narrator (Chapter 1, page 3).

"Thor, God of Thunder:"

Jake introduces himself and explains how he had gotten his name; his grandfather had given it to him after Jake and his single mom had moved in with him. Jake had been only a few weeks old, and his mom had just had an altercation with a customer in the restaurant where she had worked as a waitress. Jake's grandfather is himself known as Skelly; he had originally been named Sherman Kelly, hated the "Sherman", and always signed his name as "S. Kelly," which soon had gotten shortened into Skelly. Jake, for his part, had always been just Jake, not Jacob, and no middle name. Jake then describes his grandfather's surprising friendship with a boy named Thorbert Piddler, whom Skelly nicknames Thor after the Scandinavian god of thunder and who has a big boost in self-confidence as a result of being given the nickname. Skelly, Jake comments, has the knack of giving people self-confidence, describing how Skelly had helped him learn to do pull-ups and be seen as less of a wimp in gym class. "Atta boy, Jake," Skelly is portrayed as saying, "atta boy."

Meanwhile, Jake's recollections of Thor lead Jake to commentary on how Skelly gets sick with Alzheimer's Disease, which leads him to lose his memory. Jake describes one day when Thor brings a framed photo of himself and Skelly. While Jake and his mom try to force Skelly to remember who Thor is, Skelly gets increasingly angry, but eventually remembers. Later that night, unable to sleep, Jake discovers Skelly in his rocking chair, staring at the photograph in the light of a flashlight. Skelly notices him and, embarrassed, pushes the photograph and flashlight to the floor. Jake fetches an afghan and curls up in the chair with him, saying how cold it is.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this section. Chapter 1 alone includes several. First, there are the multiple levels of meaning in its title, which not only refers to



the twist that Jake himself mentions, that the "retarded" man in the dumpster is his grandfather, but also to the "twist" in narrative style that occurs when Jake offers that revelation. There is also the implied "twist" that the good kid is not so good; in other words, Jake doesn't feel good about either himself or the way he regards his grandfather. Finally, usage of the word "twist" here foreshadows its usage in Chapter 12, where Jake describes the near-chaotic events at his graduation as another "twist".

Meanwhile, it's important to note that later in the novel, Chapter 6 picks up the line of action where Chapter 1 leaves off, with Skelly in the dumpster and Jake witnessing his humiliation. There is metaphoric value in where Skelly ends up, considering his mental and physical states. Finally in Chapter 1, there is the portrayal of bullying, with its depiction of the younger and more able bullying the older and less able, the aggressive attacking the defenseless in a way with which, arguably, many members of the book's apparent target audience, teenagers, might not necessarily be familiar.

Chapter 2 begins what is usually referred to in literary terms as a "flashback," a shift from the narrative present into the characters' pasts. This particular flashback, as many flashbacks do, contains a substantial amount of "exposition," or explanation of the circumstances at work in the narrative present. Thus the reader learns how Jake gets his name and how he gets to be so close to his grandfather, particularly important information given what the reader has just seen of Jake's attitudes in the present and what the reader will see of his attitudes and/or reactions in chapters to come. In short, the flashback serves to define Jake and his situation as complicated and emotionally intense, drawing the reader into questions relating to how the once close, but increasingly tense and awkward, relationship between Jake and Skelly gets to the situation where Jake just stands by and watches his grandfather being taunted, and how that relationship is going to evolve.

Other important elements in Chapter 2 include the reference to Skelly giving people self confidence, which foreshadows the role reversal that takes place later in the novel as Jake tries to take care of Skelly in a similar way to how Skelly takes care of him. Then there is the reference to the origins of Skelly's name, which foreshadows events in Chapter 10 in which Skelly's name plays an important part. Finally, there is the description of Skelly telling Jake "Atta boy", which foreshadows the novel's final moments (in which Jake, after his graduation, imagines his grandfather saying the same thing.)



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

"BE-hinds and Other Family Matters:"

The narrative remains in the past, with a story of how, shortly after Skelly becomes ill, Jake's attempt to talk to his mom about a problem at school is repeatedly interrupted by Skelly's faulty reminiscing. Afterward, Jake worries that he is getting worse. Another time, Jake has a friend over to visit, is embarrassed by some of the mistakes Skelly is making, and locks him out in the yard, where he is digging. Later, as Jake is telling his mom about the mistakes, Skelly reveals that while he had been out in the yard, he had dug up Jake's long-lost favorite toy car. Jake comments that he feels pretty badly about locking Skelly out of the house, and adds that the next day, there are notes posted all over the house and pinned to Skelly's clothes reminding him of things. Jake also describes Skelly's skill at wood-crafting, and how he had carefully taught Jake everything he knew. He also describes how he and Skelly could sand a piece of wood "smooth as a baby's BE-hind," commenting that emphasizing the first syllable is one of Skelly's funny habits. Finally, Jake describes how Skelly breaks his wrists when, angrily reacting to a fight between Jake and his cousin James, who is visiting with Jake's aunt Marguerite, Skelly carries a battered table too quickly into the basement, slips on a step, and falls.

"Lucky Duck:"

The narrative of this chapter picks up where the last one leaves off, with Skelly in the hospital having his wrists set in casts. Jake describes how the doctors and nurses repeatedly tell Skelly how lucky he is to not have broken his neck or his back. As far as Jake can see, however, Skelly doesn't think himself lucky at all; he just stares at his casts, and eventually seems unable to do anything with his hands, like carry his dinner plate or play catch. His doctor tries to reassure the family that such a reaction is common in Alzheimer's patients, but Jake continues to feel upset. Meanwhile, as Skelly's condition worsens, Jake's mom gets a promotion from work, and has to hire a full time caregiver, Lanna, to take care of Skelly. Lanna, in turn, develops problems in HER home life and is unable to stay as long as Skelly needs her. Jake, to his increasing resentment, is asked to come home early and be with him. For a while, Jake comments, everything is fine, but then Skelly's condition gets even worse, his behavior gets stranger, and Jake's resentment builds. Jake's mom, meanwhile, while grateful for everything Jake is doing, is determined that his life stay as "normal" as possible, and signs him up for baseball. Jake comments on how Skelly had always loved watching him play but adds that with Skelly having Alzheimer's, his attendance at games becomes distracting. The chapter concludes with Jake's comment that he is looking forward to summer so he can "lay low."



Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The particularly important element of this section is the way it establishes and builds Jake's inner tension, specifically the conflict between his lingering affection for Skelly, as represented by his reaction to Skelly's having found the toy car, and his increasing resentment as represented by his comments about Skelly's attendance at baseball games. This experience of inner conflict is one of the key components of the narrative, and is arguably a realistic portrayal of life with an Alzheimer's patient which, as it is portrayed in the book, can be alternately frustrating and moving, infuriating and tender. This conflict also manifests externally, notably through Jake's locking Skelly out of the house and, perhaps even more tellingly, in Jake's mom's determination that everything about their home life should stay normal. Over the course of the narrative, this determination ends up doing both Jake and his family more harm than good.

Other noteworthy elements here include the reference to Lanna's troubled home life, a key component later in the narrative of her decision to quit. This can be seen as having a metaphorical and/or symbolic relationship to his mental/emotional condition. Also, there are the introductions of Marguerite, Jake's well-off aunt, and cousin James who, throughout the narrative, is a troubling presence in Jake's life, but eventually reveals that he too regards Skelly with affection. Finally, there is the introduction of Skelly's enjoyment of wood-crafting and being a handyman, a motif that appears several times throughout the narrative, showing up with particularly important effect in Chapter 9, when the "Skelly's disappearance" sub-plot comes into play, and at the novel's climax.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

"Just Say No:"

Still in flashback, the narrative describes how, when school starts again the following September with Jake in sixth grade, his laying low had become boredom, and he is glad to get back to classes. There, he is excited to meet Aaron, a new kid in town who, Jake senses, is going to be popular. In an effort to increase his own popularity, Jake invites Aaron over, putting together a complicated plan to avoid Aaron and Skelly meeting each other. For a while the plan works, but then Skelly visits the boys having forgotten to put on any pants or underpants. Aaron laughs hysterically, and Jake desperately tries to convince him to keep quiet. Aaron agrees, but then the next day Jake is taunted at school by other students who have heard the story. He resolves to withdraw completely from any kind of school life. For a while, his plan works and he is left pretty much alone, but then at one point he desperately wants to take drum lessons. However, complications arise with trying to change the situation at home to accommodate Jake's lessons, so it doesn't work out. At another point, Jake gives in to the temptation to watch a football practice instead of going home for his shift taking care of Skelly. As he watches the practice, however, his mom and the badly dressed Skelly come to get him, shouting at him in front of his friends about how much trouble he has caused. Humiliated, Jake walks back to the car with his family, hating his grandfather.

"The Nut:"

As the flashback continues, and in the aftermath of Jake's playing hooky, Lanna, the caregiver, quits. When she gets the news, Jake's mom breaks down and cries. The next day, Jake's mom and Aunt Marguerite track down a replacement. The eccentric Alma Russell, who always dresses in a nurse's uniform, had known Skelly when he had been a boy. Jake comments, "As much as she gets on [his] nerves, [he] owes Mrs. Russell ..." It had been she, he says, who had rescued Skelly from the dumpster. At this point, the narrative picks up where it left off at the end of Chapter 1, with Skelly in the dumpster and Jake watching. A school custodian tries to help Skelly out of the dumpster, finds his Medic-Alert bracelet and uses the number on it to call Mrs. Russell, who quickly shows up, rescues Skelly, and takes him home. That night, Jake's mom repeatedly apologizes, feeling guilty for having left the front door open. Jake also feels guilty, for having just stood by while Skelly was being teased. The next day, he tries to make amends by going with his mom and Skelly out for breakfast. He has a good time until his mom asks him to take Skelly to the washroom and help him wash his hands. The resentful Jake does so, but as they are walking out, Jake is distracted by a pair of pretty cheerleaders, and Skelly gets away, harassing other customers. As they shout for a manager and as Jake's mom hurries to help, Jake runs out of the restaurant and heads for home. His mom, with Skelly in the back seat, drives up beside him as he walks and tries to reassure him, but Jake angrily avoids her. Eventually, she heads home on her own, and



Jake returns to the dumpster. He looks in and discovers that Skelly had been seeing cans of paint, which Jake realizes is one of the things Skelly manages to recognize. While he's thinking, and feeling guilty, he's discovered by Mrs. Russell on her way to work. He tells her there's nothing wrong, and she hurries away, reluctant to be late. As she goes, she cries out that when he gets home, Jake can help her give his grandfather a bath. Jake is horrified to see two friends have heard her. When he finally goes home, he realizes his grandfather is happy to see him, even though he calls Jake by the wrong name: Claude Harper. Alone with his grandson for a few minutes, Skelly wonders when his mother is coming home. Jake says she's not coming, and then says, "Today I think you'll just stay here with me."

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

The action in Chapter 5 is focused mainly on the conflict that arises within the family when Jake essentially tries to do what his mom has said she wants him to do - live life as normally is possible. What Jake learns sooner than his mother is that "normal" is not what it had been, that life is never again going to be what it had been no matter how much they want it to be or try to make it be. This, it could be argued, is a common situation not only in families where Alzheimer's disease has appeared, but also in families where ANY change to lifestyle as the result of illness, injury or other traumatic situation, including divorce, takes place. In other words, the book is simultaneously exploring the specific issue of dealing with Alzheimer's AND the more general issue of dealing with change.

Meanwhile, it's important to note how the narrative skillfully and effectively explores, and comments on, aspects of life as a teenager; in particular, how important it is to not be different and/or to be popular and to not be embarrassed in public, as well as the unpredictability and volatility of emotions. The narrative vividly portrays how a complicated and difficult situation (i.e. adolescence) is made even more so by circumstances that, simply by their nature, increase the likelihood of the very thing teenagers are desperate to avoid - being perceived as not normal. That being said, the narrative also seems to be taking considerable pains to portray Jake as having a good, generous, and compassionate side to him. Yes, he goes to breakfast with his family out of a sense of guilt, but that guilt exists at least in part because he still does, to a substantial degree, love his grandfather. Again, this conflict between love and resentment is not only a vital component of both the narrative and its thematic considerations, but also of ANY situation in which a beloved individual essentially stops BEING that beloved and becomes a challenge, burden, or obstacle.

Chapter 6 sees the multi-chapter flashback coming to an end and the narrative returning to the present. It also sees the introduction of Alma Russell, whose brisk but consistent compassion and determined eccentricity provide both comic relief and an example for Jake of how to be a caring person even in the face of intense difficulty. Other important components of this chapter include the reference to "Claude Harper," which foreshadows important points, including the climax, when the name is again used, and a reiteration of the "painting" motif, this time manifesting itself in the reference to the cans



of paint. Here, as before (Chapter 4), the motif foreshadows both the initiation and the climax of the "Skelly's disappearance" sub-plot, both of which are, in an important way, triggered by Skelly's somewhat demented focus on things associated with wood-crafting, with being a handyman, and with painting (see Chapter 12).



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

"The Pearl:"

As eighth-grade graduation approaches, Jake puts off writing a book report on "The Pearl," a short novel by John Steinbeck. He comments in narration on how sad and unhappy the story is, how it reminds him of the unhappiness of his situation at home, and how neither the book nor the situation seems to have any hope. His eventual attempt to work on the report is interrupted by the arrival of James and Aunt Marguerite for their regular Sunday dinner. While they eat, Jake notices that Marguerite has noticed that Skelly has some food on his chin, but hasn't wiped it off. Jake pointedly does so, and then gets into a whispered argument with James. Jake then describes, in narration, the "production," as he calls it, that wealthy divorcee Marguerite makes of writing the check for Mrs. Russell's pay. After Marguerite and James have gone, Jake's mom confronts him about his behavior. Jake loses his temper, accusing Marguerite of not caring about Skelly at all, and of making herself feel better by writing checks. He also talks about how awful it feels to have his grandfather refer to him by the wrong name ("Claude Harper"). His mom reminds him that there is no way that she could afford Mrs. Russell on her own, that Skelly has the right to stay in his own home as long as he can, and that she OWES him, because he has given them both a home. She also says again that she knows the stress the situation is causing Jake, reminding him that staying bitter will only make him more miserable. He then tells her, "More is pretty hard to imagine."

"Sinking and Floating:"

On the morning he is due to deliver his book report on "The Pearl," which he hasn't properly prepared, Jake is delayed by having to take extra time dressing Skelly. He then describes their routine of eating breakfast together which, he says, they've done ever since Jake had been a baby; only now, he says, the roles of who feeds whom are reversed. He recalls a time when he had yelled at Skelly for not remembering the name of his cereal and had made him cry, and how he had resolved never to yell at him again. Breakfast is interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Russell, who announces that she is taking Skelly for breakfast at a community senior center. Later, as he's getting out of his shower, Jake watches Mrs. Russell gently tidy Skelly up as she helps him into her car. At school, Jake works through lunch hour to prepare his report, but doesn't get to eat. In the moments before he is due to present, the school has a fire drill, and Jake's presentation is postponed. "I'm never that lucky," he says in narration. "Never ever ever!"



Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

In Chapter 7, the narrative continues to explore and define the complex, difficult situation in which Jake and his family find themselves. That situation manifests in two perspectives: the external (i.e. the physical difficulties of life with Skelly, the relationships with Marguerite and James) and the internal (i.e. Jake's being torn between resentment of, and affection for, his grandfather). What's particularly noteworthy about this chapter is its portrayal of how the external is affected by the internal - how the various relationships in Jake's life are affected and challenged by his increasingly intense internal struggle. Other important elements in this section include a second reference to "Claude Harper," again foreshadowing the importance played by the name at the narrative's climax, and the reference to Skelly's past generosity. Finally, there is the last line of the chapter which, with simple eloquence, sums up the pain and conflict at the core of Jake's life.

The very short Chapter 8, meanwhile, serves a different function, which is to set in motion a line of action, or sub-plot, that motivates and defines the conflict and relationships of the next few chapters (i.e. the narrative of the missing Skelly and the affect his disappearance has on his family). There are two other noteworthy components of Chapter 8. The first is the glimpse of tenderness Jake gets between Mrs. Russell and Skelly. This functions as a humanization of the self-consciously eccentric Mrs. Russell and as a reminder of the sort of caring person Jake would like to be and thinks he ought to be, but unhappily knows he's not always capable of being. The final noteworthy point about Chapter 8 is Jake's comment that he is never as lucky as he is when his presentation is postponed, an ironic comment to say the least, given the "unlucky" circumstances into which he and his family are about to be plunged.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

"Officer Happy:"

Jake is so happy at the end of the day that he doesn't realize, at first, that the police car parked on his block is in front of his house. When he does realize it, he rushes in to find his mom and Mrs. Russell talking to the police. When they had arrived at the seniors' center, Mrs. Russell is saying, it was being painted. The painters had seen how fascinated Skelly was with the paint and had said he could help. Mrs. Russell had run in to get permission, but when she had come out, Skelly was gone and couldn't be found. Jake immediately becomes convinced that only he will be able to find Skelly, because he knows Skelly's favorite pathways. As he runs out and heads down the street, he's followed by the police, who want him to come home. Jake's mom, they say, doesn't want to have to worry about TWO lost people. When Jake explains his reasoning, the police officer invites him into the car so they can go looking together. Jake finds the car dirty and smelly, and also finds the officer discourteous and tired. The officer, however, says that he has volunteered to help find Skelly, but that he's been up since four in the morning, so if Jake wants "Officer Happy," he's going to be disappointed. Jake falls silent, but his thoughts are full and depressed. The search continues.

"Sherman Kelly:"

Jake returns home after dark, having been unable to find his grandfather. His mom, Aunt Marguerite and James are in the kitchen with Mrs. Russell, their conversation revealing that Skelly's information and picture have been given to the local news outlet, and a call for help will be broadcast later that night. A quarrel between James and Jake sends Jake's mom and Aunt Marguerite into the bedroom for a long quiet talk. Meanwhile, Mrs. Russell prepares to leave, Jake commenting in narration that he doesn't know why she's there; she's not family. As he walks her to her car, she comments tearfully that everyone is mad at her, and he doesn't disagree; but, after he's had a chance to calm down, he tells her that nobody's mad, they're all just tired. Later, Jake and James are alone in the living room when Jake comments that it's about the time he always reminds Skelly to use the bathroom. When James wonders how ANYONE can forget to use the bathroom, and later comments on how dark it's getting, another argument breaks out, with James shouting that Jake is the favorite grandson, that Jake is always focused on his own feelings, and that James cares about Skelly too. As James angrily wipes away tears, Jake leaves and calms down, eventually returning to apologize. At ten o'clock, the family gathers to watch the news, and is surprised not only when the item about Skelly shows up almost at the end but also when the generally cheery, but suddenly somber, reporter says he answers to the name "Sherman Kelly." James shouts out that he doesn't, and the whole family is stunned.



Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The "Skelly's disappearance" sub-plot functions on several levels. First, and perhaps most straightforwardly, it creates a sense of narrative suspense, drawing the reader into a mystery made all the more intriguing as the result of everything the author has done to create a sense of empathy in the reader towards Skelly and his family. In other words, the reader cares what happens because s/he cares about the characters. Second, this plot development raises the emotional stakes for Jake and everyone else in his family, making each of them realize not only how much they care for Skelly but how much they've let that care be overwhelmed by the day-to-day circumstances of helping him live his life. This is particularly true not only of Jake but most notably of James who, under these trying circumstances, reveals a depth and vulnerability of character that takes both Jake and the reader by surprise.

Another important element in this section is Jake's encounter with the police. Significant points here include the irony of the name the police officer gives himself which, it perhaps goes without saying, is also the name of the chapter. Also significant is the way Jake's experience metaphorically echoes his experience with Skelly. Being in the police car is essentially unpleasant, as is taking care of Skelly, but the relationship between Jake and the officer is grounded in a mutual vulnerability, with the officer and Jake sharing a bond of concern for the lost man, in the same way as the relationship between Jake and his grandfather is grounded in mutual affection.

Finally, there is the incident of the news report. Here again, there are a number of significant points. These include the pointed and somewhat angry portrayal of how the media can and tends to gloss over the profound humanity of a personally traumatic situation, and the misrepresentation of Skelly's name. This functions on two levels - to raise the stakes of the situation (i.e. if the name to which he REALLY responds isn't used, the chances of his being brought home safely decrease), and to reiterate the depth of James' connection to his family in general, to Skelly in particular, and to the situation in which they all find themselves. In other words, both James and the reader find out here that James is much less alone than he thinks he had been.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

"Candle Burns:"

Jake goes without sleep for forty-eight hours, waiting for his grandfather to come home. Eventually, he falls asleep over his supper, dreaming that Skelly is walking through a desert and waking up the next morning wondering who is going to give Skelly water. As he wakes, a police officer shows up with a painter's cap found next to a lake in a park. He tells Jake and his mom that the lake is going to be searched, and then goes. Marguerite and James immediately come over, and are soon followed by Mrs. Russell. All of them wait together for news, rejoicing when a police officer comes by with word that Skelly's body is NOT in the lake. After a quick lunch, James and Jake are sitting outside when a cab with a shopping cart strapped on its roof turns into the street and heads towards their house, eventually stopping in front. The driver gets out, reveals that he's looking for Skelly's house, and then opens the back passenger door. "Ma started to sob," Jake comments in narration. "Skelly was home." The cab driver, Campbell Burns, describes how his cab had been hit by a runaway shopping cart, how the man who had come after it first had appeared homeless, and how a good haircut and newly polished shoes had given him away as someone cared for. Campbell says he found contact and identity information on a necklace around Skelly's neck and brought him home, encountering resistance only when he had tried to get Skelly to leave without his cart. Seeing what was happening, Campbell had tied the cart to the top of the car and brought it home as well. The eccentric Mrs. Russell gives Campbell a hug, calling him Candle Burns. Later, as he helps Campbell with the cart, Jake asks whether Skelly is really okay. Campbell says Skelly should see a doctor, but seems fine, commenting that someone, while Skelly had been lost, had given him water.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

The "Skelly's disappearance" sub-plot reaches its climax in this section, with Skelly's being returned home. Before that climax, however, the stakes in the plot and for the characters are raised by the discovery of the painter's cap, which heightens the emotional intensity of the situation. Then there is the situation at the moment of Skelly's return, with Jake and James sitting together outside, for once not taunting each other and actually united, emotionally in anxiety, as well as physically by sitting together. The moment of Skelly's return is handled with emotionally powerful restraint, and Campbell Burns' story is both a significant release of tension and an interesting image. Specifically, the fact that Skelly is first perceived as a homeless person (i.e. someone disreputable and dismissible) but is then, as the result of his haircut and shoes, perceived as someone cared for, can be seen as another metaphorical echo of Jake's feelings (i.e. the troublesome old man with vulnerability perceivable upon further consideration). This is a manifestation of one of the book's central themes, the



importance and value of looking past first impressions. Then there is Mrs. Russell's mishandling of Campbell's name which is on one level simply comic, on another possible level also metaphoric, in that "candles" are traditionally symbols of hope (i.e. light in darkness). Finally, there is the link established between Jake's dream of Skelly needing water and the fact that he had been given water. On one level, the image establishes a connection between Jake's fundamental optimism about caring for Skelly and positive outcomes for the old man's troubles. On another level, the link provides yet another metaphorical representation of how it's possible to get past surface reactions (i.e. the first impression of a homeless person) and responding to and/or connecting with the vulnerable human being beneath.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

"Graduation Boy:"

Jake describes in narration how Skelly's shopping cart stays in the house for a while, how all the family's routines, including Jake and James feuding, go back to normal soon after Skelly's return, and how James surprises everyone one day by taking the shopping cart out on his and Marguerite's regular walk with Skelly. This, Jake comments, is how life changed after Skelly's "great adventure." He also comments that he had initially decided to not invite Skelly to his grade eight graduation, but after Skelly had come home, had changed his mind. He then describes the days leading up to graduation; specifically, how the decorating scheme involves stacks of books on brightly colored painting ladders. On the day of the ceremony, Jake, his mom, James, Skelly and Mrs. Russell go to the gym. Aunt Marguerite had said she would arrive late. Jake's already substantial nervousness increases as the various dignitaries make their long speeches. Meanwhile, a series of misunderstandings between the members of his family results in "another one of those twists [Jake] mentioned before" - specifically, in Skelly being left on his own, wandering about the auditorium. Jake catches sight of him just as he's climbing to the stage and heading for the paint ladders. Skelly pulls on one of the ladders, spilling the books on its top to the floor. He is immediately grabbed by security and starts to cry. Jake rushes up to him, and convinces him to calm down by saying he is "Claude Harper." Together they walk to where Jake's mom, James, and the now-arrived Aunt Marguerite are waiting. The four of them go outside as Jake receives his diploma. After he shakes his principal's hand, he goes right back outside. "We'd talk about this later," he comments in narration. "And forever, probably. But right now I just wanted to go home." He sits next to Skelly and takes his hand. "In my mind," he says in narration, "I could almost hear him whisper, 'Atta boy, Jake. Atta boy.'"

Chapter 12 Analysis

The "Skelly's disappearance" subplot essentially serves as a catalytic, or triggering, series of events that define the conclusion of the novel's main plot, or narrative line (i.e. Jake's struggle to come to terms with his grandfather's condition). After realizing how much he cares about his grandfather as the result of his disappearance, the action of this final chapter dramatizes Jake's acceptance of the circumstances of his grandfather's illness, and of the need for him to take action to take care of his grandfather even when it means some cost to himself. In other words, the action of this chapter is the climax of the main plot. Meanwhile, it's important to note the contrast between Jake's attitude and actions here as opposed to how he feels and behaves in Chapter 1. At that point, he had simply stood by, silent and inactive, as his grandfather had been humiliated. Here, he takes action in a situation that arguably has an even



greater risk for personal humiliation (i.e. more people are watching). He has, in short, matured and grown up over the course of the narrative.

There are several other important things to note about this final chapter. These include Jake's comments in narration on how soon things get back to normal (or rather what has become the new "normal") after Skelly comes home, and on the glimpse of transformation in James. This last is particularly important, in that it can be seen as foreshadowing the change in attitude that Jake himself manifests later in the chapter when he intervenes in the potential humiliation of Skelly. Then there is the reference at the beginning of the chapter to the graduation decorating scheme (a foreshadowing of Skelly's actions at the climax of the ceremony) and Jake's use of the name "Claude Harper," the name by which he initially resented being called by his grandfather but has come to realize is his grandfather's way of connecting to him. Here again, the evolution of Jake's inner character manifests in outward action, using the once-resented name in a positive way. Finally, there are the final lines in the narrative, a clear and deliberate echo of words used in Chapter 2 to define Skelly's compassion for, and positive affect on, Jake. In these final moments, the seeds of character and courage planted by Skelly at the time when those words had first been used grow into maturity, as Jake shows the same respect for, and support of, his grandfather as his grandfather had once shown for him.



Characters

Jake Moon

Jake is the narrative's central character and first person narrator. He is in his mid teens, around fourteen or fifteen, the child of a single parent, and caught in a situation where what might be described as the "usual" struggles of adolescence (i.e. conflicts with parents, desires to be liked and/or normal, questions of identity) are made even more complicated by the disruptive influence of his grandfather's illness. He is an interesting and complicated character, portrayed with what seems to be a clear-eyed honesty on the part of the author, simultaneously affectionate and angry, sad and resentful, confrontational and sulky, vulnerable and defensive. Ultimately, the narrative creates the sense that Jake is basically a "good kid", just caught in a situation that would be a challenge and a struggle for anyone.

What makes Jake's story particularly interesting is that he is not depicted as a hero. Many novels and/or non-fiction works, written for both adults and/or adolescents, attempt to portray characters caught in situations like Jake's in an idealized fashion, perhaps with the intention of showing readers the best way to behave in challenging situations like the one portrayed here. The author of this story, however, has not gone in this direction. Jake is not idealized, not perfect or noble, not unconditionally compassionate or selfless. He is at times prickly, resentful, angry and insensitive. Yet, by the end of the novel there is the sense that his future interactions with his grandfather, and the situation that Skelly's illness has brought into his life, might be defined mainly by affection and compassion. But because the novel has so clearly portrayed the personal and emotional difficulties associated with that situation, there is also the sense at the novel's conclusion that Jake will probably still have moments of resentment, but that they might be easier to handle.

Skelly

Skelly is Jake's much loved and much respected grandfather. Having opened his home to Jake and his mother when Jake had been just a baby, Skelly is essentially the only father figure Jake has ever known, meaning that when Skelly develops Alzheimer's disease and becomes increasingly unlike himself, Jake feels profoundly lost and resentful. The pre-Alzheimer's Skelly is portrayed as being generally compassionate, providing guidance and support not only to Jake and his family, but also to Jake's friends. Skelly is a role model for the sense of unconditional kindness and consideration that Jake eventually manifests himself. In other words, Skelly teaches Jake well, ironically unaware that he will himself be the beneficiary of the kind of active concern he once demonstrated.



Jake's Mom (Mavis)

Jake's mom is portrayed as strong willed and determined, responsible but occasionally insensitive. A single mother, she continually and consistently strives to make the best of the challenging situations in which she finds herself, but sometimes does so without thoroughly considering the reality of those situations. This is particularly true of her expectations of Jake when Skelly becomes ill. Determined that Jake live as "normal" a life as possible, she doesn't really have a clear idea of what normal means to him, or what he wants it to mean. It's important to note, however, that because the novel is written from the first person point of view (i.e. Jake's), she is portrayed from that point of view, meaning that the realities of her life in this situation are only fleetingly glimpsed. The point is not made to suggest that Jake is insensitive to what his mother is like and what she is going through, but rather that there is, in all likelihood, more to her experience of the situation than meets Jake's eye.

Aunt Marguerite, James

Marguerite is Jake's aunt, his mother's sister and Skelly's other daughter. A wealthy divorcee, she comes across as having particular difficulty dealing with Skelly's illness and taking less of an active role in taking care of him. Again, however, it must be remembered that she is portrayed solely from Jake's highly subjective point of view; as is the case with his mother's portrayal, there is probably a great deal more going on for her than the narrative allows the reader to see. James is Marguerite's son and Jake's cousin, portrayed in Jake's narration as unfriendly, bad mannered, and selfish. That perspective shifts, however, when Skelly disappears and James, much to Jake's surprise, reveals himself to be quite concerned and upset. This aspect of the narrative is a key manifestation of one of the book's themes, the necessity for looking past surface impressions for the true nature of a person's character.

Thorbert Piddler

Thorbert is a friend from Jake's elementary school days. The novel portrays him as being the victim of bullying because of his name, but having been helped towards a sense of self-respect by Skelly giving him the nickname "Thor," the name of an ancient Scandinavian god. While Jake's first person narration never makes it explicitly clear whether Skelly had done this consciously (i.e. as a deliberate effort to boost Thor's confidence), it clearly implies this is the case when Jake follows this example of Skelly's compassion, his ability to help people develop self-confidence, with a story of how Skelly had done the same thing for him. On another level, and as suggested in the commentary above on Skelly as a character, the Thor story is an early-in-life example of the sort of compassion that Jake eventually comes to display towards the man who taught him about compassion in the first place.



Lucas, Aaron

Lucas is Jake's friend in late elementary school. Aaron is a new arrival at school with whom Jake tries to make friends. Jake finds himself distanced from both Lucas and Aaron as the result of Skelly's illness and behavior; rather, he deliberately distances himself from Lucas as the result of his embarrassment at Skelly's behavior and he becomes distanced from Aaron by his betrayal of trust when Aaron spreads the word about Skelly's behavior after promising he wouldn't. Jake's difficulties with these relationships are, on one level, examples of how difficult it is for him to sustain the kind of "normal" life his mother wants him to sustain. On a more representational level, Jake's difficulties with his friends dramatize the difficulties experienced by many people struggling to sustain outside relationships while coping with difficult life situations or circumstances.

Lanna

Lanna is the first of two full-time caregivers hired by Jake's mom to help take care of Skelly. Lanna is portrayed as being competent but somewhat hard and inflexible, at least in part the result of having a difficult home situation of her own. It is perhaps ironic that Jake comes across as having little sympathy for her situation while expecting her to have more sympathy for his, an example of how the narrative doesn't portray him as a hero but instead as a flawed human being in a difficult situation. The same, in fact, could be said of the barely glimpsed Lanna, making her another example of the novel's thematic concern with the importance of looking beyond initial appearances.

Alma Russell

Mrs. Russell is the second of the two caregivers engaged by Jake's mom to take care of Skelly. Determinedly eccentric but undeniably affectionate and sensitive, she serves as both comic relief and a vividly portrayed example of the sort of unconditional compassion that Jake needs to learn and/or appreciate, and eventually does learn. She is also, like Lanna, a manifestation of the novel's theme relating to the importance of looking beyond a person's surface for true identity.

Officer Happy

The police officer who takes Jake out in his car to help look for Skelly gives himself this nickname when Jake questions his commitment to the search. He is one of the narrative's more vivid examples of the value of looking beyond surface impressions, his assertive confession of having volunteered to work past the end of his shift out of concern for Skelly sharply shaking Jake out of his assumptions.



Campbell Burns

Burns is the taxi driver who finds the missing Skelly and brings him home. His actions (i.e. perceiving aspects of Skelly's appearance as indications that he is NOT the homeless person he first appears to be) are yet another manifestation of the narrative's thematic concern with looking beyond surface impressions.

Claude Harper

This is the name that Skelly, as the result of his Alzheimer's, uses repeatedly to refer to his grandson Jake. While the narrative never explicitly makes the point, it's interesting to note that Alzheimer's sufferers often use names and/or words from other, perhaps inappropriate parts of their memory to refer to people, things and/or events in their present. In other words, "Claude Harper" may actually be someone Skelly once knew, but in his confusion, he is using the name incorrectly. Jake's use of the name at the novel's climax is noteworthy for two reasons. The first is ironic, in that Jake, in an effort to express familiarity and safety, to assure Skelly that Jake is someone he can trust, uses the name of a complete stranger. The second is metaphoric, in that Jake's use of the name can be seen as a manifestation of his acceptance of the reality of Skelly's situation. He is communicating with Skelly on his terms, as opposed to the terms that Jake would LIKE to be in place.



Objects/Places

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a medical condition in which important functions of the brain break down and eventually cease. The process begins slowly with loss of memory, and eventually progresses to loss of physiological function and death.

Skelly's House

This is the house where Jake lives, he and his single mom having been invited to move in by his grandfather Skelly shortly after Jake is born. After Skelly becomes ill with Alzheimer's, Jake's mom is determined that Skelly should stay in his home as long as possible, her reasoning being that because he had given THEM a home when they needed it, the least she and Jake can do is provide the same sense of safety and security for HIM when he needs it.

The Toy Car

Relatively early in his illness, Skelly discovers what had once been Jake's favorite toy, a miniature red Ferrari that everyone in the family thinks has been long gone. The discovery of the car, and Skelly's returning it to Jake, believing he would be happy, can be seen as a symbol and/or manifestation of the love that Skelly still feels for his grandson, even though Skelly is losing his grip on who Jake actually is. This makes the car, and what it brings into the family, a manifestation of the narrative's thematic consideration of the value of looking beyond surfaces. In other words, through the discovery and presentation of the car, Jake is reminded that Skelly isn't just an old man losing his mind, but his grandfather with whom he has a shared past and a lingering bond.

The Dumpster

In the first chapter, Jake watches as two friends taunt Skelly as he stands on the edge of a dumpster and eventually climbs into it.

Wood Crafting

Working with wood - sanding, painting, carving, shaping - is one of the common experiences that Skelly and Jake had shared during Jake's childhood, their time together forming and strengthening their emotional connection and bond. Their hobby extends to essentially being handymen around the house, an aspect of their experience that plays an important role in the novel's main subplot and climax.



The Cans of Paint

After Skelly is taken out of the dumpster by Mrs. Russell, Jake discovers that it contains some cans of paint, which he believes are what triggered Skelly to climb into it, cans of paint being symbols or reminders of good times in their relationship; specifically, the time they had spent together on Skelly's hobby of woodcrafting.

The Ladders at Graduation

The decorating scheme at Jake's grade eight graduation includes a pair of ladders, brightly painted but essentially similar in structure to those that Skelly and Jake used during their work as handymen around the house. As such, they are something familiar to Skelly, trapped in an Alzheimer's-defined world where so much is UN-familiar. His response to the ladders, an attempt to use them for a familiar purpose, disrupts graduation, but is simultaneously the catalyst for Jake's climactic, decisive action taken to support and protect his grandfather in the same way that Jake had once been supported and protected.

THE PEARL

This short novel by acclaimed American writer John Steinbeck is the subject of a book report to be written by Jake, but is also the catalyst for what he portrays in narration as dark, gloomy depressing reflections on his and Skelly's situation.

Skelly's Medic Alert Bracelet

"Medic Alert" is an organization that provides ID bracelets and medallions to individuals suffering from illnesses and drug allergies who may not, in certain medical situations, be able to speak for themselves and provide information ABOUT those individual's illnesses and allergies. Skelly's Medic Alert bracelet provides the information that enables his being retrieved from the dumpster into which he climbs in Chapter 1.

Skelly's Shopping Cart

When Skelly is returned home after his brief disappearance, he brings with him a shopping cart of which he had found and taken possession while he had been missing. Alzheimer's patients often find comfort or security in objects, persons or situations with which they, in non-afflicted circumstances, would have no connection. Skelly's shopping cart is just such an object. James' inclusion of the shopping cart in his and Marguerite's regular Sunday walks with Skelly represents his acceptance of Skelly's new reality, a situation which, in turn, foreshadows Jake's similar acceptance of that reality on the night of graduation.



Themes

The Tension between Resentment and Affection

Throughout the narrative, Jake struggles with the conflicting feelings between resentment and affection, experiencing both in response to his grandfather's illness and increasing emotional disability. It's important to note that the author skillfully portrays Jake as not being dominated by either one or the other, but instead feeling both, with what appears to be relatively equal frequency and intensity. The portrayal also suggests that each is a natural response to the situation in which Jake finds himself, making no judgmental suggestion that the resentment is automatically bad or that affection is naturally better. It's important to note, however, that Jake DOES make this distinction, feeling guilty about both the intensity and frequency of his resentment as well as what he sees as a lack of intensity and/or frequency of his expressions of affection. In other words, while Jake has opinions about his feelings, the narrative seems to have no such opinions, leaving the reader to draw conclusions and/or come to insights about those feelings on his/her own.

It's also important to note that this tension, which is essentially internal, grounded in feeling, perspective and memory, manifests externally, or in action. The story shows Jake acting with both resentment and affection, as opposed to just talking about his feelings in his narration. This is an effective, vivid example of a fundamental principle of storytelling; a story is better told, and a reader more effectively engaged, if a situation is shown, rather than told, plot actively manifesting theme, theme motivating plot, both centering in the actions and/or transformative journey of a central character, or protagonist.

The Necessity for Looking Past Surface Impressions

Several times throughout the novel, people are challenged to look past their first impressions into what might be summed up as the truth of a character or situation. This challenge manifests right from the opening chapter, in which the reader is challenged to look past his/her first impressions of the watching youth, assuming that he is the "good" one of the trio of taunters, by being confronted with the truth which is that he is in fact the un-reactive grandson of the troubled old man being taunted. The remainder of the narrative integrates that challenge into the main plot and into the circumstances facing the characters, in that Jake is constantly being challenged and/or reminded to look past his grandfather's surface behavior and remember the loving, compassionate, sensitive man who has helped raise him. Specific examples of this challenge include Jake's glimpse of Skelly's vulnerability when looking at the photograph of Thor, the discovery of the toy car, Skelly's disappearance and, perhaps most importantly, the climactic moment at graduation. At that point, Jake is challenged to react to his grandfather's intense appearance of being lost not with his previously habitual resentfulness of the way his grandfather appears or acts, but with compassion for what his grandfather feels. Other



circumstances or characters which manifest this theme include Mrs. Russell, whose apparently deliberate eccentricity masks warmth, compassion and tenderness, and Cousin James, who reveals the vulnerability beneath his bullying surface when the family believes Skelly to be missing, possibly dead. All these circumstances seem to suggest that the reader remember that no matter what a person's exterior may suggest, there is a deeper, personal meaning, experience, or truth beneath, and that this underlying cause, in all likelihood, involves at least some degree of pain. In the lesson Jake learns and comes to integrate into his life, there is the thematic suggestion that consideration of and compassion for another's pain should, ideally, make up at least some part of the reaction to their exterior.

Dealing with Change

The novel's central conflict is defined by Jake's struggle to come to terms with change - specifically, the change in his grandfather's attitudes and behavior resulting from his being afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Jake goes through what might be described as the usual stages of having to cope with such change - denial that change is happening, resistance to the new normal that results from that change, resentment of enforced changes resulting from the initial change, acceptance of the change and adoption of attitudes and practices that reflect and accommodate the new normal. In portraying this process of movement from denial to acceptance, from resistance to accommodation, the narrative suggests that such movement is, or might be, possible under the circumstances of almost any significant change, whether associated with disease or any other significant circumstance; that is, if the person experiencing such change is willing and able to accept that possibility. This is where the narrative's other two themes come into play, in that there is the sense throughout the book that Jake can only truly deal with change when he begins to look past what he sees as having changed (i.e. his grandfather's behavior) and relate instead to what hasn't changed (i.e. the truth of his grandfather's vulnerability). In other words, the novel seems to be suggesting that the old saying is true - "the more things change, the more things stay the same." It's just that sometimes, what's the same is harder to find. It's important to note, of course, that the saying is true of negative values as well as positive ones. Bad aspects of a person or situation can remain beneath superficial positive change. The novel is suggesting, however, that an experience of truth is only possible once reactions to external change are transcended, and consideration of what lives beneath that change becomes a primary motivation, and a primary goal.

Style

Point of View

For the most part, the narrative unfolds from the first person, past tense point of view, telling the story from the perspective of its central character, teenager Jake Moon. This narrative perspective draws the reader into Jake's story with an immediacy and intimacy that bring his struggles very close to home. If a reader can't immediately and personally identify with Jake's situation because the reader doesn't already have an experience of coping with the debilitating illness of a loved one, after reading the book s/he will at least have some idea of what that situation feels like. It's reasonable to assume that this, at least to some degree, is the author's intent - to awaken readers, whatever their experience, to a broader and deeper understanding of the internal conflicts associated with dealing with such a challenging external situation.

The exception to the novel's general first person point of view can be found in the book's opening chapter, which is narrated from a third person point of view, as though the narrator is not present at the events described, which, as the final moments of the chapter surprisingly reveal, he actually is. This twist in point of view functions on two levels. On the level of storytelling, it serves to create a sense of surprise and interest in the reader, intriguing him/her about the characters and situation, how it all comes about and how it's all going to resolve. On another level, this stylistic/narrative choice suggests that on some level, Jake is distancing himself from his grandfather's situation and his own reaction, not fully entering into either the circumstances or his feelings about those circumstances. There are several possible reasons for this; he can't accept either, he is uncomfortable with either, he is in denial about both, or he is fearful of both. In any case, the distance Jake places between himself and his grandfather in the first chapter sets him clearly at the beginning of a journey of transformation that, at the end of the narrative, places them more closely together emotionally than, quite possibly, they have ever been. Jake, by the end of the narrative, has "graduated" into connecting with and loving his grandfather in an adult, compassionate, aware, sensitive, and, above all, realistic way.

Setting

The community in which the story takes place is never actually named, and neither is the country within which that community is established. That said, there is a sensibility about the language and the socio-cultural school environment that very clearly suggests that the country is the United States, and the community is at the least urban, if not fully cityfied. In terms of the time period in which the novel takes place, there are references to computer games and videos, but there are no references to things like cellular phones or social networking. These circumstances suggest that the narrative is set in the late 1990's or early 2000's, which on some level seems to fit. Alzheimer's disease, while existent arguably for centuries, only emerged into public, mainstream



consciousness in the later decades of the 20th Century. Ultimately, however, the narrative's setting is relatively unimportant. This is because the themes of the narrative, as manifested in the relationships it portrays, are essentially universal and timeless. There has always been, and always will be, conflict between resentment and affection, such as that experienced by Jake Moon, within those placed in a position of having to care for a loved one suffering from a debilitating disease, illness, or other such circumstance. There will also always be the hope or potential for resolution of that conflict if, as the narrative's secondary thematic consideration contends, human beings in such situations remain connected, at least to some degree, with that which made their relationships important, special, and valuable.

Language and Meaning

The language in which the narrative is written and presented gives the very clear impression of having been chosen and shaped to reflect, as closely as possible, the way a teenaged boy might think or react in this situation. There is a sense of volatility about both the story and the language in which it's told, of self-consciousness, of wanting to be heard and understood that comes across as sensitively observed and accurately, effectively portrayed. There is a certain sense that both story and language are somewhat dated. There are, for example, no cellular phones, no references to social media, and no references to online resources for research into Alzheimer's, all of which might have made Jake's struggles a bit easier. The point is not made to suggest that Jake's story is invalid and unengaging simply because it's not quite up to date. On the contrary, by focusing on Jake's emotions and on the circumstances that trigger them, the novel's ultimate sensibility is one of intimacy and immediacy. Its focus on personal, human connection and relationships lends it a sense of universality and accessibility, that transcend technological circumstance and, in many ways, age. Ultimately, this isn't just a story for young adults. This is, on a basic level, a story to which anyone who's experienced the illness of a family member - any illness, any family member - can probably relate.

Structure

Approximately two-thirds of this short novel is structured in a straightforward, linear fashion, essentially following Jake from what he, as first person narrator, experiences as his moment of least respect for his grandfather, rejection at the dumpster, to his moment of most respect, rescue at graduation. What is structurally interesting about the piece, however, is that just as that linear narrative is getting underway, at a high point of emotion and revelation, the author introduces an extended flashback, taking the reader back several months and providing explanations of how the characters and their situation get to that point. This interruptive structure functions on several levels. First, and most directly, it creates a significant state of suspense. At the moment that the interruption takes place, burning questions arise in the reader's mind and, in all likelihood, make him/her want to read further in order to understand what's going on and find out what's going to happen next. Second, as the interruption progresses, it gives



the reader insight into, and compassion for Jake who, at the point of interruption, presents himself as having done something essentially unforgivable. The previously mentioned sense of suspense eases somewhat, but more suspense is created, as the narrative raises questions of how Jake, with all his history and inner conflict now apparent, is going to move on, how he is going to resolve the troublesome situation in which he finds himself, questions the remainder of the linear narrative eventually answers. Finally, the interruption can be seen as a manifestation of the novel's thematic consideration of the importance of looking beneath surfaces, in that it takes the reader beneath the apparent surface of Jake's thoughtlessness and shows the pain and confusion that triggered it.



Quotes

"The two boys shut up after that. I mean, they chuckle a little bit and all. But you can tell they're not exactly busting with pride over making fun of a retarded old man." Chapter 1, p. 2.

"On account of the third kid turned out to be the most shameful of all. Because the third kid was me. And the old man in the Dumpster was my grandfather." Ibid, p. 3.

"It's one of those lessons in life we can all learn from, I think. Never complain about a hair in your pie when your waitress is teetering on the brink of insanity." Chapter 2, p. 6

"He doesn't remember any of this now. Not even my name. But I'll always be grateful to him for calling me something normal. It's important to have a name you like, I think. Especially when you're a kid. Life is tough enough ... without having to stand up at your desk on the first day of school and announce that your name is Yehudi or Prunella or something." Ibid, p. 6 - 2

"For the rest of the night, I sat across from Skelly's recliner and watched him watch TV. I hardly blinked. Hardly even moved. Maybe if I watched him close enough, he wouldn't have a chance to slip further away." Chapter 3, p. 16

"Alzheimer's has three stages. Each stage is worse than the one before it. I don't know if any of the stages have official names, but in my head, I think of them as (1) sad, (2) sadder, and (3) the saddest thing you've ever seen." Ibid, p. 16 - 2.

"...the first time I helped him sand a table, the two of us didn't talk for over thirty minutes, I bet. Just stood there working side by side, listening to the rhythm of the sandpaper as it rubbed back and forth across the wood. Even now, I still love the sound of that." Ibid, p. 22

"The guys on my team started calling him Mr. Magoo, after that old-man cartoon character with the bad eyesight, who's always walking where he shouldn't. I laughed. You learn to do that by fifth grade. If you don't laugh, they never stop." Chapter 4, p. 34.

"'No' gets easier the more you say it. And as the year went on, I got better and better at making up excuses and turning down invitations. The logic was as simple as my new life. If I didn't go to anyone's house, no one would expect to come to mine." Chapter 5, p. 40.

"Sometimes when my mother gets real low like that, she needs to talk. Other times, she just needs to be alone." Chapter 6, p. 46

"What if John Steinbeck turned out to be right? What if there are some people in the world who just aren't meant to be happy? People whose lives just keep getting worse and worse until they finally hit bottom, and nothing can hurt them anymore?" Chapter 9, p. 83-84



"I sat up the whole night with the lights on. I didn't even get under my covers. It just seemed fair to do that, I thought. When your grandfather is wandering around all night in the darkness, it seems sort of selfish to sleep through it, all safe and sound." Chapter 11, p. 92

"It seems odd, I guess, that our happiest moment in days would be NOT finding Skelly. But when your week is as stressful as ours had been, you don't really sit around and analyze whether it's okay to feel good for a second and eat a peanut butter sandwich." Ibid, p. 98

"And so that's how my family was changed by my grandfather's ordeal, I guess. Not in huge, drastic ways. Not even in our relationships with one another. But in personal little ways that didn't make much noise." Chapter 12, p. 104



Topics for Discussion

What do you think is the symbolic value of Skelly being in a dumpster? What are the parallels between where he is physically and where he is mentally / emotionally?

On one level, the book's title can clearly be seen as referring to Jake's literal graduation from eighth grade. In what other sort of graduation does he participate? In other words, if graduation is a departure from one phase of life into another, from what non-school phase of life does Jake depart, and into what phase does he move, over the course of the narrative?

Discuss your experiences with a family member having Alzheimer's, or any other disabling illness. What were the stresses on your life? On your family? How did you cope? How did your family cope?

In what ways does the injury to Skelly's wrists metaphorically echo or represent his mental/emotional condition?

Obtain and study a copy of *THE PEARL* by John Steinbeck. In what way do its narrative and themes reflect those of *THE GRADUATION OF JAKE MOON*? In what ways are its narrative and themes different? Do you agree or disagree with Jake's opinion of it? Why or why not?

The actions of the teenagers in Chapter 1 can be seen as bullying. Do you agree with this perception? Why or why not? Discuss your experiences of bullying - of seeing it, of being bullied, of doing the bullying. In what ways were/are they similar to the experience portrayed here? In what ways were/are they different?

Discuss how Jake's internal conflict, his affection for his grandfather vs. his resentment of the situation, affects and/or defines his external conflict (i.e. with friends, with school, with family).

Write an alternative version of the "Skelly's disappearance" subplot from the point of view of Jake's mother, taking the events of that subplot and describing them, in first person, from her perspective. Explore and develop her feelings and reactions, incorporating what you understand of her opinions about her son, her sister Marguerite, her nephew James, her father Skelly and, perhaps most importantly, Skelly's Alzheimer's disease.