

Hate List Study Guide

Hate List by Jennifer Brown

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Plot Summary

Hate List is the debut novel by award-winning writer Jennifer Brown. In this novel, Valerie Leftman must return to school five months after her boyfriend, Nick, took a gun and shot their classmates, many of whom Valerie placed on a list she dubbed the hate list. Many of the kids and most of the adults think Valerie knew of Nick's plot to kill the kids on the list despite the fact that Valerie saved the life of one girl and was shot herself. Even the police thought Valerie responsible until an unnamed girl went to the police and insisted that Valerie never shot anyone. In Hate List, Valerie and everyone around her must pick up the pieces after tragedy, creating a story that is both universal and so unique that it will leave the reader changed on a fundamental level.

Valerie Leftman has elected to return to her high school five months after her boyfriend, Nick Levil, took a gun and began shooting inside the school cafeteria, known as the Commons. Valerie stopped Nick and was shot herself, but the media played up the fact that Valerie was co-author of a hate list on which most of the names of the victims appeared. Valerie was investigated by police and cleared, but everyone from Valerie's parents to her classmates continue to believe her guilty to some degree.

On the first day of school, Ginny Baker, a girl Nick shot in the face, runs crying out of Valerie's homeroom. At lunch, Valerie finds herself shut out by her old friends, including the girl who has been her best friend since kindergarten. Surprisingly, however, Jessica Campbell, the one girl who tormented Valerie the most with the nickname Sister Death, reaches out to Valerie and offers to let her sit at her table in the Commons.

Valerie begins to draw as a way to deal with all that is going on around her. At the same time, Valerie looks back on the past, recalling her relationship with Nick and how the bullying of the other kids led to a common bond between Valerie and Nick. When Nick first moved to Garvin their freshman year of high school, Valerie began a flirtation with him. Then, one day when she became frustrated with some of kids at school and the fighting between her parents at home, Valerie began a list of everyone she hated. Nick found this list fascinating and began adding to it with Valerie, making it something they could share in common. Valerie never noticed that the list became something more to Nick, something dangerous.

Valerie is invited to join the Student Council and help work on a memorial for the victims of the school shooting. Valerie tries to help, but finds herself having to turn her back on Nick, the one thing she never thought she could do. At the same time, Valerie discovers that her father is having an affair and that her family is falling apart. Valerie's mother does not trust her, her father is tired of dealing with her, and her brother thinks she's too selfish to see what is going on around her.

At a party, Valerie is threatened by an older kid with a gun. This act pushes Valerie over an edge until she learns that Ginny Baker has attempted suicide. Valerie visits Ginny and suddenly realizes that she is not the only one dealing with Nick's actions. Valerie realizes that people need to know the truth about Nick, but also about those who were



his victims. Valerie visits each of the families of the dead and injured, collecting items to be placed in a time capsule that will be the memorial for the shooting. The memorial is presented at graduation where Valerie is finally able to face her fellow classmates and explain her actions as well as show how much Nick's acts have changed her, just like they have changed everyone else.



Part 1: Chapters 1-5

Part 1: Chapters 1-5 Summary

Jennifer Brown is an award-winning columnist. This is her debut novel.

Valerie Leftman struggles to get out of bed on the first day of school, reluctant to face her classmates for the first time since her boyfriend, Nick, shot up the Commons five months ago. Valerie, her parents, and her brother decided that it would be best not to uproot the family and move. Valerie also decided it would be best to return to school, the same school that hailed her a hero after the police cleared her in the investigation, rather than to hide at home and be tutored. However, it was much easier when it was all a plan, not a reality. Valerie calls her psychiatrist, Dr. Heiler, as her mother continues to push her to get ready for school. Dr. Heiler reassures Valerie and promises she does not have to stay all day if she cannot. Valerie tucks a picture of her and Nick in her back pocket, remembering better times with him.

Nick called Valerie early and told her he would be at school that day. Nick had missed the past two days to hang out with his new friend, Jeremy. Valerie was happy because she was afraid Nick planned to break up with her. They talked about a couple of new names for the hate list before agreeing to meet in the Commons, the school cafeteria. Valerie grabbed a waffle in the kitchen and spoke to her little brother, Frankie, before rushing out the door to catch the bus.

Valerie's mother drives her to school, fussing over her all the way. When they arrive, Valerie steps out of the car and then hesitates, not sure where to go or what to do. Valerie's old friends see her. Duce, Nick's best friend, criticizes Valerie for not going to the cemetery. Mrs. Tate, the school counselor, comes out and directs Valerie to her office. Mrs. Tate pushes Valerie on applying to college, but Valerie can barely think past getting to her first class. Valerie thinks of Nick again, of how he always seemed to understand how she felt about her parents fighting all the time. Valerie thinks no one really understood Nick.

May 2, 2008. Valerie was always tortured by Christy Bruter on the bus, but if she hunches down and listens to her MP3 player, Christy will often ignore her. However, that was not the case that day. As Christy got off the bus, she yanked Valerie's earbuds out of her ears, causing the MP3 player to crash to the floor and break. When she got off the bus, Valerie was so angry that she told her friend Stacey that she could just kill Christy. Valerie told Nick about it, too, when he arrived. Nick promised to deal with it for her.

Chapter 3. Valerie arrives to her first class late and everyone stares as she walks in. Her first teacher is Mrs. Tennille, a teacher Nick had targeted on May 2 and killed another teacher, Mr. Kline, for refusing to reveal her whereabouts. Valerie quietly takes a seat. A moment later a girl begins to cry. Valerie realizes it is Ginny Baker, a girl who



was shot in the face by Nick and had had to undergo extensive plastic surgery. Ginny Baker leaves the room, unable to deal with Valerie's presence. This sets off a debate over whether or not Valerie has a right to be at school.

Nick and Valerie walked into the school side by side. When Nick spotted Christy, he began charging toward her, forcing Valerie to rush to keep up. Nick shouldered Christy, told her she'd been on the list a long time, and shot her. Valerie never saw the gun and did not realize what had happened until Nick moved on.

At lunch, Valerie talks to her best friend Stacey and learned their mother's had had a falling out over Valerie's role in the school shooting. When Stacey moves to sit at their old lunch table, Duce makes it clear Valerie is not welcome, so she goes out into the hall to sit. Jessica Campbell, the most popular girl in school and Valerie's biggest tormentor, comes out and offers to let Valerie sit at her table. Valerie declines. Instead, Valerie draws pictures of her fellow students the way they really are, as Dr. Heiler had told her to look at them.

Valerie helped to stop the flow of blood from Christy's abdomen before coming to realize Nick was still firing the gun. Valerie rushed off after him, needing to stop him. Valerie saw Mr. Kline trying to protect a group of kids, heard Nick ask him where Mrs. Tennille was. Valerie saw Nick shoot Mr. Kline and turn the gun on Jessica Campbell. Valerie rushed up and stood between Nick and Valerie, begging him to stop. Valerie tripped over Mr. Kline's body and stumbled into Nick. The gun fired and Valerie fell to the floor and quickly lost consciousness.

Valerie's mother picks her up after school. They talk about the falling out with Stacey's mom, who had been a friend of Valerie's mom for years, and laughed together. Valerie goes to her room and thinks of cleaning it up. Instead, she focuses on a drawing she had started earlier at school.

Part 1: Chapters 1-5 Analysis

The novel begins with a newspaper clipping of a story written by a woman named Angela Dash that describes a school shooting at Garvin High School. The reader quickly learns that Garvin is a fairly small town and Garvin is the only high school in the area. Valerie Leftman is still recovering from a gunshot wound to her thigh received during the shooting when she stopped the shooter, her boyfriend, from killing anyone else. Valerie has been declared a hero by the school board, but demonized by the press throughout the country. Now Valerie finds herself facing the first day of school after the shooting.

As the reader follows Valerie through the decision to return to school and her first day at school, they also learn of the events that took place on May 2, 2008. It is clear that Valerie knew nothing of Nick's plans to shoot up the school. However, it is also clear that Valerie was a person full of frustrations and hate, someone who had been bullied for a long time and did not know how to channel those feelings into something helpful. If



viewed through cynical eyes, it can be suggested that Valerie pushed Nick to do what he did simply by fueling his hatred of those around him. This is the crux of the plot in this novel.

Valerie is struggling to deal with not only the tragedy that her boyfriend perpetrated on May 2, but also with her grief over the loss of someone she once loved and needed. Valerie's family is falling apart, tensions between her parents high long before the shooting. Valerie's struggles at school are complicated by bullies. Nick was an outlet for Valerie, someone who understood her and gave her support she desperately needed. The loss of Nick is profound for Valerie, especially as she finds herself in a situation where she cannot openly grieve for Nick because of what he did and how he died. To add to this the distrust of everyone around her and her mother's fear of what Valerie might do to herself or others, Valerie finds herself in a very difficult situation.

At the same time Valerie is dealing with her emotions and reactions to Nick's actions, she returns to a school full of kids dealing with the aftermath of the school shooting. There are those who were not in the Commons that day, but who lost friends who were. There are those who were in the Commons and are dealing with the loss of friends. Then there are those who were actually injured by Nick that day and still dealing with the after effects of their injuries. It is a dark, difficult situation and everyone must find their way out. Again, this is the crux of the plot in this novel.



Part 2: Chapters 6-15

Part 2: Chapters 6-15 Summary

It is May 2, 2008 and Valerie has just woken up in the hospital. Valerie is unclear on what has happened, but her parents are visibly upset and the police are in the room. When the room clears, leaving Valerie temporarily alone with Frankie, he tells her about Nick's death.

Valerie remembers how Nick came to Garvin their freshman year and she began a flirtation with him in Algebra class. One day Valerie was having a hard time and began to make a list of people who were making her life difficult, a list she dubbed her hate list. Nick asked about it and thought it was pretty cool. Valerie also recalls her first visit to Nick's house and how he shared with her his love of Shakespeare.

While in the hospital, Detective Panzella visits her to ask questions about the shooting. Panzella shows Valerie emails taken from her computer between her and Nick. The emails show an increasing interest in death and violence on Nick's part, but Valerie realizes she did not see it at the time. At the same time, Valerie remembers how Chris Summers tortured Nick for months.

The following day Panzella returns and asks why some of the kids at school called Valerie Sister Death. Panzella then asks if Valerie had Nick target Christy Bruter on purpose.

Valerie has improved enough from her leg injury to sit in a wheelchair during the day. Stacey comes to visit and suggests that Valerie owes an apology to everyone injured in Nick's shooting rampage.

Valerie thinks she is going home, but instead the hospital's psychiatrist comes and moves Valerie to the psych ward. Valerie resists, causing a couple of orderlies to come hold her down while a nurse gives her a shot.

Valerie spends ten days in the psych ward, so heavily drugged that her memories of it are somewhat dim.

Valerie begins seeing Dr. Hieler a few days after leaving the hospital. Valerie finds Dr. Hieler calm, intelligent, and kind from their first meeting.

Detective Panzella comes to let Valerie and her family know that there will be no charges pressed against her for the shooting. The detective tells Valerie that a blond girl came to the district attorney and swore that Valerie never shot anyone.

On her second meeting with Dr. Hieler, he asks her to describe herself. Valerie struggles, instead focusing on the people around her who hate her now.



Valerie sees an article in the paper about the shooting that suggests the school has been brought together because of the shooting. Valerie takes the article to Dr. Hieler and asks if this is true, does it mean Nick is a hero. Valerie expresses her guilt about the shooting, especially the fact that Nick shot Christy. Valerie wanted Nick to confront Christy, but she never wanted anyone to get hurt. Valerie then expresses a fear that she might use the hate list to finish what Nick began, though she cannot imagine ever killing anyone.

Part 2: Chapters 6-15 Analysis

These chapters are something of a flashback, taking the reader back to the days following the shooting. Valerie is in the hospital recovering from her gunshot wound to the thigh. Valerie is surrounded by her family, but it is clear that her parents are convinced that Valerie did something wrong and cannot be trusted. At the same time, everyone is concerned that Valerie might be suicidal due to the emails she shared with Nick as well as the fact that Nick committed suicide after the shootings. As time passes, Valerie is treated for her perceived depression and then released to a family that is unsure what to do with her.

Valerie is investigated for her part in Nick's rampage, but is soon cleared when some students in the Commons that day come forward and insist that Valerie never hurt anyone. Valerie, however, is not quite so clear on her own complacency or innocence in Nick's rampage. Valerie continues to hold on to her strong feelings for Nick and to wonder how her actions, how her hate list, might have influenced Nick to act as he did.

It is clear to the reader at this point in the novel that the media has deeply influenced everyone in Garvin, and perhaps throughout the country, to see Valerie as guilty as Nick. Everyone needs someone to blame. This causes even Valerie's parents to treat her as though she is a criminal. This complicates things for Valerie, make it difficult for her to deal with her own feelings about what Nick has done and about her own part in Nick's actions. At the same time, Valerie is grieving for her friends, her classmates, and for what she has lost in her own family.



Part 3: Chapters 16-26

Part 3: Chapters 16-26 Summary

After the second day of school, Jessica Campbell comes to Valerie's house to ask her to help the Student Council plan for and execute a memorial for the shooting. Valerie refuses out of fear that the other members of the Student Council will not want her there.

Valerie's mother expresses concern to Dr. Hieler that Valerie might hurt the members of the Student Council when she learns that she plans on attending a meeting for the memorial.

Valerie remembers discussing the Student Council elections last year with Nick in the days before the shooting as she walks into the Student Council meeting. Valerie is largely quiet as the Student Council discusses ideas for a memorial. Valerie suggests a time capsule and memorial bench with the victims' names on it. This leads to a discussion of whose names should go on the plaque, the dead or all the victims. The discussion continues as everyone debates over whether Nick's name should be on the plaque. Valerie says it should not and this upsets her so much that she runs out of the building, upsetting her mother who has been waiting for her.

After the Student Council meeting, Valerie's mother drags her to an unscheduled appointment with Dr. Hieler out of fear Valerie has hurt someone. Valerie refuses to talk about what happened. A few days later, Valerie speaks with Mrs. Tate about her experiences at school thus far, expressing guilt over Ginny Baker's reaction to her presence on the first day of school.

On a Saturday, Valerie arrives at Dr. Hieler's late because of detention due to her refusal to eat lunch in the Commons. After the appointment, Valerie goes to the parking lot to wait for her mother. Valerie does not want Dr. Hieler to feel as if he has to wait for her, so she crosses to a shopping center across the street. Valerie stumbles into an art studio where she meets an odd woman, Bea, who encourages her to explore her artistic side.

Chapter 21. On Monday, the principal harasses Valerie about sitting alone in the hallway at lunch. Jessica surprises them both by joining Valerie in the hall.

Valerie gets a message that her mother cannot pick her up after school, but she does not want to ride the bus. Instead Valerie walks the short distance to her father's office, only to accidentally discover her father is having an affair with his secretary.

Valerie runs into Jessica Campbell when she returns to the school to wait for her mother. Jessica talks Valerie into coming back to the Student Council meetings.



The following Saturday Valerie convinces her mother to allow her to spend the afternoon in Bea's art studio. Bea encourages Valerie's talent as well as her need to heal.

Meghan walks with Valerie to the Student Council meeting. Meghan asks why Valerie and Nick put her on the hate list even though they barely knew each other. Valerie recalls a time when Meghan laughed when Chris was bullying Nick, but she cannot bring herself to tell Meghan this because it seemed so petty now.

Valerie begins to feel a part of the Student Council, even helping to decorate for Mrs. Stone, the teacher advisor's, birthday. Meghan encourages Jessica to invite Valerie to a party a friend of theirs is having.

Part 3: Chapters 16-26 Analysis

Jessica Campbell was once one of the girls that Valerie felt the most bullied by; a girl who perpetuated the nickname Sister Death because of Valerie's choice of heavy black eyeliner and dark clothing. However, Jessica is also the girl that Valerie stopped Nick from shooting on May 2, standing between him and Jessica in a move that caused Nick to shoot Valerie in the thigh. Now Jessica seems to have made Valerie her pet project, befriending her and protecting her from the principal as well as some of the kids in the school. In fact, Jessica has made Valerie a part of the Student Council and told all her friends to be nice to Valerie. It is a turn of events that Valerie does not completely trust nor does she know what to do with it.

Things are beginning to get better for Valerie. She is handling school well and she has begun to draw on a regular basis, including going to Bea's art studio every week. Valerie even seems to be making good progress with Dr. Hieler. However, Valerie's mother clearly does not trust her daughter and is frightened that Valerie plans to hurt the same girls who were the target of Nick's rampage in May. This fear seems to be illustrated for Valerie's mother when Valerie begins helping the Student Council plan a memorial for the shooting victims. However, Valerie's motives are honest, even if she does not understand them or the motives of those who have invited her to help. Valerie's progress also seems to be undermined somewhat by the discovery that her father is having an affair even though this knowledge also brings some relief to Valerie, showing her that her parents' problems are not completely her fault.



Part 3: Chapters 27-39

Part 3: Chapters 27-39 Summary

Valerie and Jessica are told to move out of the hallway due to the movements of some builders. Jessica takes Valerie into the Commons and to the table where her friends are sitting. However, Valerie is clearly unwanted by Jessica's friends, causing her to get up and leave.

Valerie's father tells her that he has come clean to her mother about his affair and is moving out. When Valerie asks her father if he can ever forgive her, he tells her no because she wrote the hate list and put his name on it.

Valerie sneaks downstairs for some food and finds her mother crying in the dark. Valerie talks with her and realizes her mother needs things to be normal. To help facilitate this, Valerie tells her mother about the party Jessica has invited her to. Although Valerie really does not want to go, she accepts her mother's permission to go.

Valerie shows Dr. Hieler a picture that she painted for him and promises to bring her other drawings for him to see.

Valerie goes to Jessica's house the night of the party and has dinner with her and her friends. Then they go to the party together. Josh, one of Jessica's friends, dances with Valerie and then takes her outside for some fresh air. When they are approached by some older boys, including Meghan's brother Troy, Josh reveals he is only with Valerie to stop her from causing any trouble. Josh leaves and Troy pulls a gun, threatening Valerie and warning her to stay away from his sister. Valerie leaves the party and calls her dad to pick her up.

When her father arrives to pick Valerie up, he is clearly annoyed. Valerie and her father argue on the side of the road, her father threatening to kick Valerie out of what has become her mother's house. Valerie's dad then takes her to the apartment he shares with his secretary, Briley. Briley asks Valerie what happened and then argues with Valerie's dad over the right course of action.

Valerie misses her appointment with Dr. Hieler the next day, instead going to Bea's and making a dark, sad painting. Valerie sees herself as both a monster and a sad girl.

Valerie drops out of the Student Council and attempts to end her relationship with Jessica. Jessica calls her selfish.

As winter moves into spring, Valerie's wrap up their divorce and her mother falls in love with her divorce attorney. Everyone seems happier. May 2 passes without much fanfare. Then Valerie learns that Ginny Baker has attempted suicide.



Valerie goes to visit Ginny Baker in the psych ward at the local hospital. Ginny's mother is less than thrilled to see her, but Ginny expresses a desire to speak with Valerie. Ginny expresses some guilt in the shootings, thinking if she had not been friends with Nick Chris, her boyfriend, would not have been so cruel to Nick.

Part 3: Chapters 27-39 Analysis

Valerie attends a party with Jessica in order to show her mother that things have returned to normal in the aftermath of her father moving out of the house. However, the party does not go well and Valerie finds herself threatened by the older brother of one of her classmates. Valerie is deeply hurt by this threat and frightened, but she still does not want to upset her mother. Instead, Valerie calls her father. Unfortunately, Valerie's father is so angry and humiliated by Valerie's part in Nick's rampage that he threatens to toss her out on her own and disown her. This shows Valerie how deep the hurt has gone for her parents in what happened, but it also makes her feel abandoned by one of the people who should trust her and love her above all things. It is a disturbing reality for Valerie to realize her father no longer wants her to be a part of his life.

Valerie is deeply upset by what has happened to her and she turns in on herself, backsliding in all the progress that she has made since Nick's death. This includes shutting herself out from the one person who has reached out to her and tried to be her friend. However, as she deals with the threats made against her, she realizes she has to stop living in the past and she has to let Nick go. Valerie does this by visiting Nick's grave, but this sets off another struggle with her mother, showing Valerie just how little her parents trust her now. Again, Valerie finds it difficult to deal with this reality.

As Valerie struggles to let go of the past, she begins to see how what Nick did has impacted other people, including his best friend, his victims, and their families. Nothing makes Valerie see the truth more clearly than Ginny Baker, a young girl who was shot in the face by Nick and who is struggling with her own guilt in Nick's actions. Finally Valerie begins to move outside of herself and see that she is not the only one who is struggling to heal in the aftermath of Nick's actions.



Part 3: Chapters 40-44 and Part 4

Part 3: Chapters 40-44 and Part 4 Summary

Chapter 40. Valerie visits Dr. Hieler and suggests that she write something about the shootings to present to the school.

Chapter 41. Valerie visits the newspaper offices and speaks with Angela Dash, the reporter who wrote most of the stories on the Garvin High School shootings. Valerie asks Ms. Dash not to write anymore stories on the shooting, but finds her unresponsive to this request.

Chapter 42. Valerie goes to Jessica and shows her a plan for presenting the memorial for the shooting at graduation. Jessica is excited by the plan and agrees to help Valerie implement it. Together they go to the homes of the victims, both living and dead. During these visits, Valerie expresses apologies and gets a multitude of responses.

Chapter 43. Valerie sees Dr. Hieler one last time and tells him she finally knows who she is again.

Chapter 44. Valerie tells Mrs. Tate that she has decided she wants to go to college, just not right away.

Part 4. It is graduation day. Valerie looks into the audience and sees her parents, Dr. Hieler, and Bea. They all have a different emotion on their faces, from pride to relief. As the ceremony begins, Jessica takes the stage to make a speech. After talking about the future, college, and academia, Jessica takes a long pause. Jessica then begins to talk about the shooting and the impact it has had on this graduating class. Jessica then discusses the time capsule that will be planted under a memorial bench to commemorate the shooting and its victims. Valerie joins her on the stage and together they discuss the items the surviving victims and the dead victims' families have given to the time capsule. When they have mentioned them all, Valerie returns to her seat only to learn that Jessica has added two more names to the list. Jessica adds a copy of Hamlet in Nick's name and a book of sketches in Valerie's name.

Part 3: Chapters 40-44 and Part 4 Analysis

As the plot of the novel comes to its conclusion, Valerie finally finds a way to make peace with her own guilt in Nick's actions. Finally Valerie accepts that what Nick did, he did on his own. However, Valerie also owns her own complicity in his actions by apologizing to the victims and their families for her involvement in the hate list. Many of the families accept Valerie's apology with grace, while others insist that Valerie was a hero on that day and does not need to apologize. By reaching out to the others, Valerie has finally come out of her own head and found a way to make right what she once did not know how to deal with in a healthy, safe way.



The ending of this novel is hopeful even though the message continues to be a tough one to deal with. Hate exists and there is little anyone can do to stop it, the novel seems to say. However, there is a right way and a wrong way to react to it. No one could have seen what Nick was thinking or what he was planning to do. To allow it to ruin more lives would not be right. Life goes on and despite the darkest moments, Valerie and her classmates as well as their families have found a way to do just that.



Characters

Valerie Leftman

Valerie Leftman is a senior in high school as the novel begins. Five months previously, Valerie's boyfriend went on a shooting rampage in the Commons, the cafeteria at Garvin High School. When Valerie realized what Nick was doing, she stopped him. However, before she could stop him, Nick killed six people and injured dozens of others. In the aftermath, it becomes public that Valerie and Nick kept a notebook of names they called the hate list and that many of those who were injured or killed were on the list. As a result, Valerie is initially placed under investigation by the police in the belief that she helped plan Nick's rampage. In the end, however, Valerie is cleared of charges in large part because two of the students went to the police and insisted Valerie never shot anyone.

In the aftermath of Nick's shooting, Valerie finds herself struggling with her own guilt in connection to the hate list as well as grieving for Nick and struggling to prove to those around her that she can be trusted. Even Valerie's parents no longer trust Valerie and fear daily that she might continue what Nick started. When Valerie returns to school she finds herself a complete outcast. Valerie's old friends do not want her around and feel as though she should have seen it coming in the very least.

One person still believes in Valerie and wants to be her friend. However, this girl, Jessica Campbell, was on the list more than once. Valerie saved Jessica's life the day of the shooting, but not because she consciously wanted to save Jessica but because she did not want to see anyone killed. In response, Jessica has become Valerie's biggest supporter and wants Valerie to help plan a memorial for the victims, both living and dead. This only adds to Valerie's struggles to heal, but in the end Jessica plays a big role in Valerie's healing.

Nick Levil

Nick Levil is the son of a woman who takes a lackadaisical attitude toward parenting, leaving Nick feel as though he is an afterthought in his mother and multiple stepfathers' lives. Added to this the bullying that Nick suffers in high school, it creates a situation in which Nick feels that no one cares about him and he has to make his own statement on the world. Nick becomes friends with a young man who promotes this feeling in Nick, leading to the devastating day in which Nick pulls a gun at school and begins to target all the people he blames for his unhappiness. Nick never stops to think about what his actions will do to his girlfriend or his best friend. Nick takes the easy way out and leaves those who love him to pick up the pieces.



Jenny Leftman

Jenny Leftman is Valerie's mother. Before the shooting, Jenny is struggling with her marriage. In the aftermath of the shooting, Jenny is left feeling as though she has messed up somewhere along the line, that she is a bad mother. This deeply impacts Jenny's self-esteem, leaving her feeling as though she is out of control. As a result, Jenny panics each time she thinks that Valerie might be up to something no good, everything from suicide to a new rampage against her classmates. Jenny is determined not to be caught by surprise again. In the meantime, Jenny's marriage disintegrates and it takes her husband leaving her for Jenny to finally find happiness again.

Dr. Hieler

Dr. Hieler is a psychiatrist who agrees to take on Valerie's case. Dr. Hieler is a kind, gentle man who seems to understand exactly what Valerie needs to hear. Valerie turns to Dr. Hieler as she struggles with the most difficult aspects of her situation. Jenny also sees Dr. Hieler professionally and turns to him each time she believes Valerie is up to something that will get her in trouble or worse. Dr. Hieler is a sounding board, but he is also a source of much needed compassion in Valerie and her mother's struggle to deal with Nick's actions on May 2.

Jessica Campbell

Jessica Campbell is the most popular girl at Garvin High School. Jessica dislikes Valerie before the shooting and often calls her names, such as Sister Death. For this reason Jessica's name is on the hate list before the shooting. On the day of the shooting, Valerie moves between Nick and Jessica, giving Jessica the chance to get away just as Nick shoots Valerie in the leg. Five months later, Jessica makes Valerie her friend, trying to pull her into the Student Council to plan the memorial and inviting her to a party. When Valerie tries to end the friendship, Jessica accuses her of being selfish because it was very difficult for Jessica to be her friend.

Ginny Baker

Ginny Baker is a student whom Nick targeted intentionally, searching for her under tables. Nick shot Ginny in the face and caused extensive facial injuries that require multiple surgeries to repair. On the first day of school, Ginny is healed physically enough to attend classes, but emotionally she is still a mess. For this reason, Ginny elects to remain home and be tutored. In the end, Ginny cannot deal with her emotions regarding the shooting and attempts suicide.



Chris Summers

Chris Summers is a student in Nick and Valerie's class. Chris is a cruel boy who often targets Nick. When Valerie thinks back on the bullying that might have led to Nick's actions, she often thinks of Chris. At the end of the novel, the reader learns that Chris and Ginny were dating and that Chris was jealous of Nick's friendship with Ginny. Ginny suffers guilt over this, believing that if she had ended her friendship with Nick or made Chris stop bullying Nick, it might have prevented the shooting.

Stacey

Stacey had been Valerie's best friend since kindergarten. However, after the shootings, Stacey bought into the press coverage and came to the belief that Valerie had some prior knowledge of the shootings and could have done something to prevent them. Stacey is friendly toward Valerie when school begins again, but does nothing to include Valerie in with the rest of their friends.

Duce

Duce is Nick's best friend. When school begins, Duce is deeply angry with Valerie because she never went to Nick's grave during the summer. When Valerie finally does go to Nick's grave, she finds Duce there. Duce tells her that he was also investigated after the shootings and that he also wondered if maybe he should have known what Nick was planning even though he did not.

Mrs. Tate

Mrs. Tate is the guidance counselor at Garvin High School. On the first day of school, Mrs. Tate comes and finds Valerie, taking her to her office so that she does not have to hang out around the other kids before class. Mrs. Tate reassures Valerie, suggesting that she was a girl who always had potential even if Nick never did. In the end, Mrs. Tate becomes a buffer for Valerie against the unpleasantness associated with returning to school.



Objects/Places

Hate List

Valerie began a hate list in a red notebook at school on a day when some of the other students and her parents upset her. The list became something Valerie and Nick could do together, a joke in Valerie's eyes that Nick took seriously. On the day of the shootings, Nick picked off kids whose names were on the list.

Drawings

After the shootings and upon her return to school, Valerie began making drawings of her classmates as she saw them: with question marks for faces, with wolf-like faces, or made of huge tears. At graduation, Valerie gives the notebook with these drawings in it to the time capsule.

Painting

Valerie makes a painting that depicts serenity for Dr. Hieler to show her gratitude and to show him how she sees him.

College Catalogs

Mrs. Tate attempts to give Valerie catalogs for college on the first day of school, but Valerie refuses, unable to make a decision about her future. However, Valerie takes the catalogs at the end of the novel and takes them with her on her travels after graduation.

Time Capsule

Valerie suggests to the Student Council a time capsule as a memorial for the victims of the May 2 shooting in the Commons.

Hamlet

Hamlet was Nick's favorite of Shakespeare's works. Nick's family gave his copy to the time capsule to honor his memory.

Nick's Grave

Valerie only visited Nick's grave once in an attempt to put the past behind her.



Mr. Leftman's Office

Valerie goes to her father's office one afternoon to get a ride home and discovers, quite accidentally, that her father is having an affair with his secretary, Briley.

Dr. Hieler's Office

Valerie finds Dr. Hieler's office neat and comforting on most of her visits to see him.

Mrs. Tate's Office

Valerie sees Mrs. Tate's office as the opposite of Dr. Hieler's: chaotic and messy. However, Valerie believes Mrs. Tate's office smells like mornings should first thing in the morning.

The Commons

The Commons is the cafeteria at Garvin High School where students would hang out before class in the mornings. This is where Nick Levil shot many of his classmates before shooting himself.

Garvin High School

Garvin High School is the name of Valerie's school and is where her boyfriend shot many of her classmates and teachers.

Themes

Hatred

Valerie begins a list she calls the hate list because she is frustrated and needs a way to deal with her feelings. When Nick finds out about the list, it becomes something that they can share together. For three years, Valerie and Nick add to the list, often discussing it over the phone and in emails. Valerie never sees how seriously Nick takes this list, she only sees it as a fiction to help her deal with the people who torment her at school and at home. Nick, however, sees it as a hit list and in the end acts on it, killing or injuring several of the people whose names are on the list.

After Nick's shooting rampage at school, Valerie becomes aware of how dark her thoughts had been for the last three years as well as how dark Nick's were. Valerie struggles with these thoughts. Valerie had thought it was all a fiction, that it was just a joke she and Nick shared. Now Valerie can see how this hatred she and Nick shared for the classmates who bullied them led to tragedy.

As Valerie heals from the shooting, she begins to come out from her internal world and notice how Nick's actions, how hatred, affected the people around them. Soon Valerie begins to understand that she and Nick were not the only ones with insecurities who had bad days and felt frustrated. Valerie sees that hatred did nothing but make things worse. For this reason, Valerie and her fellow classmates are able to find a new outlet to deal with their frustrations while still aware that hatred exists. It is a maturing moment for Valerie and her classmates, a moment of bonding that helps them deal with their grief.

Trust

Valerie's relationship with her parents was strained before the shooting because her parents had grown unhappy in their marriage. However, after the shooting, Valerie's father elects to remain with the family. This only adds to the tension and unhappiness in Valerie's life as her parents continue to argue. To add to this tension the fear on Jenny's part that she failed Valerie as a mother and that Valerie might again cause some trauma, it makes life in the Leftman home nearly impossible.

Valerie has lost the trust of all her classmates, of her teachers and her principal. This is almost understandable because of Valerie's relationship with Nick. Many people believe that Valerie should have known what Nick was planning, or that she did know. There is also the hate list. The hate list was released in the press after the shooting and everyone knows that Valerie helped write it. This adds to the distrust of Valerie among her classmates and adults in her life. Valerie must earn their trust back.

The worst for Valerie, however, is the lack of trust on the part of her parents. When Valerie joins the Student Council to help with the memorial for the shooting victims, her



mother assumes she has done this to hurt those whom Nick spared for one reason or another. When Valerie runs out of the school upset, her mother drags her to Dr. Hieler to force her to explain what has happened. When Valerie visits Nick's grave without telling anyone, her mother calls the police out of fear that she has runaway or gone off to commit suicide. All of this places Valerie in a difficult situation, unable to act with the freedom of a teenager without coming under suspicion. Again it is something Valerie must overcome to prove herself trustworthy.

Grief

In the aftermath of Nick's suicide, Valerie is overwhelmed with the tragedy of his actions. At the same time, however, Valerie misses the Nick she knew before that day. Nick and Valerie were close for three years, sharing everything together. They often joked and teased together, sharing a great deal of laughter and happiness together. It is this that Valerie misses after Nick's death.

As Valerie returns to school, she finds herself alone and an outcast. This makes Valerie miss Nick all the more. However, it is not okay for Valerie to miss Nick because many think of him as a monster for what he has done. Valerie's own mother has warned her for years that Nick would mean bad news for her, but she refused to listen. Now this makes it impossible for Valerie to talk to her mother about her grief for Nick. The only person who seems to understand is Dr. Hieler, but Valerie finds it difficult to speak even with him about it.

Valerie feels a sense of loyalty toward Nick and hates that being friends with Jessica, that advising that his name be omitted from the list of victims on the day of the shootings, is a betrayal to him. Valerie does not know how to grieve for Nick in light of the shootings. For this reason, grief becomes a puzzle Valerie must solve, making it a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view. The author tells her story through the voice of Valerie Leftman, her main character. Valerie tells her story in the present tense, while telling the reader of memories she has of her relationship with boyfriend, Nick Levil, before he committed the worst tragedy ever by shooting students in their high school.

The point of view of this novel tells an intimate story that revolves around one person, Valerie Leftman. The author's plot tells the story of how it has impacted Valerie that her boyfriend took something that was supposed to be private between them and used it to commit one of the worst crimes imaginable. At first Valerie lives inside her head, unable to see how her boyfriend's actions have affected those around her. However, in time Valerie is able to see beyond herself. Hence, the first point of view is the right choice for this character and this plot.

Setting

The novel is set in a small Kansas town called Garvin. Garvin is a close-knit community of upper class families. There is only one high school, therefore most of the kids in town know one another. The town is big enough that it has its own newspaper, a fact that plays an important factor in what has happened five months prior to the beginning of the novel.

The setting of this novel is important because the community is so close knit that Nick's actions on May 2 have a strong impact on nearly every family in town. The town is small enough that there is only one hospital, therefore all the victims of the shooting are taken to the same place, and there is only one high school so that Valerie has only two choices when the school year rolls around again. Valerie must return to the high school her boyfriend shot up, or she must be homeschooled with a tutor. This sets up the situation that propels a great deal of the plot, making the setting of the novel very important to the plot.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in simple English. Most of the novel is written as though in the voice of a teenage girl, therefore most of the language is simple and common to that used by teenagers. There is little slang, however, except for the use of a few words common to modern teenagers. By avoiding slang, the author has made her novel somewhat timeless, but she has ignored an essential use of language that is important among modern teenagers.



The language of the novel is appropriate to the main character of the novel but avoids techniques that might make the novel difficult for young readers to comprehend. The novel's intended audience is young adults, therefore the language is designed to the level of these young readers. In this way the language satisfies its basic intention, making it appropriate to the plot and its characters.

Structure

The novel is divided into four parts. In the first part of the novel, the author begins the chapters with a snippet from a newspaper article that was written about the shooting at Garvin High. These article snippets allows the reader to know who was shot, what their injuries were, and the public's impression of what caused the shooting. The author has also presented Valerie's memories of the shooting in this first part of the novel, an impression that is slightly different from the newspaper accounts. The rest of the novel deals with real time moments, the second half moving back in time to the immediate aftermath of the shooting while the final two parts of the novel tell the story of the year following the shooting and the dedication of the memorial to the shooting victims at the graduation ceremony.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplot. The main plot follows Valerie as she deals with the aftermath of Nick's shooting. One subplot follows Valerie's relationship with her parents, while another follows Valerie's new friendship with former nemesis, Jessica Campbell. All of the plots of the novel come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

Quotes

"Even though in May he became a monster in the eyes of the world, in my eyes he was still that guy holding me above the ground, kissing me and calling me Juliet." (Part 1: Chapter 1, p. 20-21).

"It was kind of weird because eventually they were all so busy hating each other, they forgot about hating me." (Part 1: Chapter 3, p. 73).

"The only thing that had changed was me." (Part 1: Chapter 4, p. 89).

"It's funny that the name that would turn out to be the most recognizable of my class—Nick Levil—was a name nobody'd even heard of before our freshman year." (Part 2: Chapter 7, p. 131).

"And when it dawned on me that she was probably apologizing for being my friend, that dream world just blinked out, vanished. It never existed." (Part 2: Chapter 9, p. 169).

"When I got home from school my second day back, I really doubted my ability to keep going back into that school. Forget transferring at the end of the semester. I'd never make it that long."

Part 3: Chapter 16, pg. 212

"He was lying about who he was, just like I had. And it was okay. But it so didn't feel okay. And I wondered how, given everything that had happened, he couldn't see why lying about who you are isn't okay."

Part 3: Chapter 22, pgs. 262-263

"I trailed off, realizing that no matter how mad Nick and I had been that day, no matter how mean Chris had been to Nick, given everything that had happened, it just wouldn't make sense to her. It barely made sense to me anymore." Part 3: Chapter 25, pg. 278

"No matter what the police found, you were involved in that shooting, Valerie. You wrote those names on that list." Part 3: Chapter 28, pg. 295

"I wasn't sure I even knew how to have fun with those people. Their idea of fun was so different from anything I'd ever known." Part 3: Chapter 29, pg. 302

"I knew what she was thinking: Being pretty isn't everything, but sometimes ugly is."

Part 3: Chapter 39, pg. 371

"I don't know if it's possible to take hate away from people. Not even people like us, who've seen firsthand what hate can do. We're all hurting. We're all going to be hurting for a long time. And we, probably more than anyone else out there, will be searching for a new reality every day. A better one." Part 4, pg. 399



Topics for Discussion

Who is Nick Levil? What crime did he commit? Why? What reasons does Valerie have for Nick's actions? What reasons does the author imply about Nick's actions? Why did Nick target those that he shot? Why did he shoot Mr. Kline? Who finally stopped Nick? How? For what reason? How does Nick respond to his own actions? Why do people want to blame someone besides Nick? Was anyone else responsible?

Who is Valerie Leftman? Why does she blame herself for her boyfriend's actions on May 2? Why was Valerie happy Nick planned to confront Christy Bruter on May 2? What did Valerie want Nick to do to Christy? What did he do? Did Christy's actions on the bus warrant what Nick did to her on the morning of May 2? How did Valerie feel when she realized what was happening? What did she do about it? Were Valerie's actions heroic?

What is the hate list? Why was it started? Whose names were on it? What did Valerie think of this list? What did Nick think of this list? Who had the list on the morning of May 2? What did this list have to do with Nick's actions on the morning of May 2? Why does Valerie think that Nick's actions on May 2 are her fault? Did Valerie know what Nick was planning? Why did Nick as her if she remembered their plan as he was shooting people on the morning of May 2?

Who is Ginny Baker? Why does she become so upset when Valerie walks into her first class on the first day of school? What happened to Ginny on May 2? How has she dealt with it? Later in the novel Ginny attempts suicide. Why? What guilt in regard to Nick's actions on May 2 does Ginny admit to at the end of the novel? How does Valerie react to this admission of guilt on Ginny's part? How does this admission help Valerie deal with her own emotions regarding Nick's actions on May 2?

Why does Valerie's mother distrust her in the aftermath of May 2? Does Valerie's mother really believe that she helped Nick plan the shootings? Does her father believe Valerie helped plan the shootings? Why does Valerie's mother get upset when Valerie plans to join the Student Councils' plans for a memorial to the victims of May 2? Why does Valerie's mother treat her as though she is about to commit suicide or homicide at any moment? Is this a fair reaction on the part of Valerie's mother?

What was Nick and Valerie's relationship like before May 2? Why did Valerie think that Nick was about to break up with her? Who was he hanging out with in the month before the shooting? How might this have been related to Nick's actions? Why does Valerie continue to grieve and miss Nick in the aftermath of the shootings? Is this a reasonable reaction on Valerie's part?

Does Valerie owe an apology to the families and victims of the shootings on May 2? If so, for what reason? Why does Valerie focus on the articles in the newspaper by Angela Dash about the shooting? Why does she ask Angela Dash to stop writing these articles? What does Valerie see that Angela Dash is doing with the articles to the victims and

their families? Why does Valerie visit the families of the victims and the dead at the end of the novel? How does this impact Valerie at the end of the novel? Is it helpful?