

Imagine Me Gone Study Guide

Imagine Me Gone by Adam Haslett

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Imagine Me Gone Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Section 1: Prologue, Part 1 (Margaret, Celia, Margaret, Celia).....	5
Section 2: Part 1 (Michael, Alec, John).....	9
Section 3: Part II (Michael).....	12
Section 4: Part II (Celia, Alec, Margaret, Celia).....	16
Section 5: Part II (Michael), Part III (Alec, Michael).....	19
Section 6: Part III (Margaret, Cecil, Michael, Alec).....	22
Section 7: Epilogue (Celia, Alec, Margaret).....	26
Characters.....	28
Symbols and Symbolism.....	33
Settings.....	36
Themes and Motifs.....	37
Styles.....	41
Quotes.....	42

Plot Summary

NOTE: This guide refers to *Imagine Me Gone* by Adam Haslett, First Edition (Hardback).

In *Imagine Me Gone* by Adam Haslett, a young American named Margaret is engaged to marry a young Englishman, John. After a visit to the United States for Christmas, she returns to England and discovers that John is in the hospital. He is once again suffering from depression, something that has not happened for years. Margaret decides to go ahead with the wedding and stays by his side as he recovers.

Years later, Margaret and John are still together. They are the parents of Michael, Celia, and Alec. Of the three, Michael is the only one who has inherited John's mental illness. He suffers from extreme anxiety. Life changes for John, though, as he experiences a series of job losses that lead to unemployment without the prospect of future employment. He feels that he has let the family down, and his depression returns. Finally, he says goodbye to the children and commits suicide.

After his death, the family's attention turns to supporting Michael, whose mental condition deteriorates as he gets older. He becomes obsessed with women who are unattainable because they are married or lesbians. His obsession causes them to avoid him at times. This increases his anxiety. He also has problems getting into college and later graduate school. While he finally gets in both, he does not finish. He drops out of college and a mental breakdown forces him to leave graduate school and move in with his mother. Throughout his life, he has taken out loans with no prospects of being able to pay them back. This also adds to his anxiety. Medication is the only thing that allows him to cope, but the more medication he takes, the more he needs.

When Michael has anxiety attacks, he turns to his family for help. They attempt to support him as he chases after the girls who do not show up for dates and he feels as though he cannot breathe. Supporting him often means ignoring others or comes at a financial expense. At the same time, they are trying to manage their own lives. Celia is not happy with her current job and has problems committing to her live-in boyfriend. Alec is gay and also has commitment issues. Michael's inability to pay back his loans burden Margaret.

Alec decides to action in an attempt to help everyone by intervening and trying to get Michael off his medication. Celia is doubtful, but hopeful that it can happen and agrees to give it a try. She feels the strain of supporting Michel and has started to pull back. Margaret also agrees. Most importantly, Michael agrees to give it a try as he wants for himself what his family wants for him.

Michael cannot function without his medication, though, and dies. Before he dies, he leaves his family with a message that helps them deal with their own issues. They finally understand him. Celia gets married; Alec commits to a partner; and, Margaret moves to

a new house and begins to look back at her life with John. She sees it in terms of the wonder of what followed, instead of sadness.



Section 1: Prologue, Part 1 (Margaret, Celia, Margaret, Celia)

Summary

Imagine Me Gone, a novel by Adam Haslett, opens as Alec comes out of a cabin and starts walking through the village in the snow. The December thaw has come. He is thinking about the fact that he needs to call his sister and mother to tell them what has happened. He also wants to talk to his boyfriend, Seth, to tell him that everything will be okay now and they do not have to worry about interruptions. In the distance, he sees a lobsterman that he and his brother, Michael, had seen before but never spoken to. As he walks, he thinks about the lobsterman's life and how the sound he had made while chopping wood had bothered Michael. He turns around and runs back towards the lobsterman. When he reaches him, he tells him that something has happened to his brother.

In the Prologue of Section 1, there is a voice mail response that Michael imagines receiving when he calls his doctor. The message says that the doctor is never in the office and that he will return messages on Monday. It goes on to give Michael's situation and says if that is the case, the caller should call the doctor's answering service. It then addresses Michael's need for medication and the fact that he may not get it in time to save him. In that case, he should rest in the knowledge that he has loved his family to the best of his capacity.

Part 1 focuses on Margaret's memories of one of the family's summer vacations. They spend it at the houses of one of John's partners who has a house on the mainland and one on an island. Both houses are in locations that Margaret and John cannot afford to own themselves. Preparation for the trip is hectic for Margaret as she makes sure that the children have everything and worries that John may not have gotten the dates right. One year, the owners had come for their own vacation a day early and the family had had to get a hotel for one night. They arrive at the house on the mainland and everyone settles in. After the children are in bed, Margaret thanks John for bringing them there.

Margaret also explains her past with John. Normally, they should be living in England, not in the United States, but they had left London for Boston due to a consulting assignment John's company had sent him on. While there, the company had gone out of business, so they stayed. John is British and Margaret, who is American, had met in London and had gotten engaged there. After returning to England after a visit to the United States, Margaret finds out that John has been admitted to the hospital. Upon further investigation, she finds out that John has suffered from depression ever since he was a child. He has had a relapse and that is why he is in the hospital now. Margaret talks to the doctor about his condition and decides to proceed with the marriage. They have now been together for seventeen years and have three children: Michael, Celia, and Alec.



While on vacation, John takes Cecil and Alec out on a boating trip. Once they are away from the shore, he lies down in the boat and tells the children to imagine that he is not there and they have to get back to the shore, What will they do? He cuts the engines and does nothing. Celia realizes that they need to row and tries to get Alec to help her, but he is no help. The game ends when she does not manage to get the boat to the shore.

While John is with Cecil and Alec on the boat, Margaret goes for a walk with Michael. She enjoys the surrounding environment, but Michael is wary due to his asthma.

During the walk, he talks about the man he got his black king snake from. John had tried to help him get investors so that he could expand his business. Even though the investors had decided against investing, John and the man had stayed in contact with each other. Michael tells his mother that he thinks that the man, David, has so many pets because he is sad. He wants to know whether John had tried to help the man because he is black. Margaret admonishes him for thinking that someone's race causes them to be sad. Michael then starts talking about slavery. He finally gives up trying to get his mother to understand what he is talking about. Then he starts talking about music. His mother thinks that it is too bad that he does not dance to the music he loves so much. The conversation shifts again when Michael tells Margaret that John plans to move the family back to England. Hearing the news angers Margaret because John has not said anything to her about it. As she looks at Michael, she sees both a physical and psychological resemblance to John. The latter scares her.

Later, Michael greets Celia, Alec, and John as they return to the shore. He tells John that Margaret wants to speak to him. Then, he leads a game in which he and Celia leave Alec in a cave, telling him that he must stay because he is supposed to be a monk. Alec does not like the game, but he stays. Michael and Cecil wander and find some seals. Michael tells Cecil that their parents are going to argue with each other, and they talk about the fact that their parents argue a lot. Michael starts to throw stones at the seals and Cecil tells him to stop. After some time, they go back to get Alec. Later, Margaret and John do fight. It bothers the children. Both Alec and Cecil go downstairs where their parents are while Michael peaks out from his room. Cecile gets mad at Margaret for yelling at John. John puts the children back to bed and defends Margaret. He does not, however, say what Cecil wants to hear.

Analysis

The prologue is full of symbolism of hope in the face of what readers sense is a backdrop of death. When Alec comes out of the house, the end of winter thaw is occurring. This represents the beginning of new life and rejuvenation. Lobsters are also symbols of protection, discovery, and rejuvenation. Alec talks to the lobsterman for the first time, symbolizing that whatever has happened now opens the way towards renewal and rejuvenation. Alec eludes to this possibility himself by thinking he can call his boyfriend to tell him that everything will be okay now.



The second chapter gives readers an insight into the mind of Michael. At first, readers might think that what they are reading is a real voicemail, but it does not take long for them to realize that it is not as it becomes more emotional and finally void of hope. While Alec's chapter gives the impression that his life may improve, the last paragraph lets readers know that what has happened to Michael is not good and that he has probably died.

The prologue introduces Alec and Michael and begins to characterize them. Alec, who has a life ahead of him, narrates a chapter full of hope and one that moves the plot along. Michael's chapter goes nowhere and indicates that there is no future for him.

The first chapter in Part 1 takes readers back to the time when Alec and Michael are children. Readers are able to see the past that Michael refers to in the voice mail message.

Margaret's chapter introduces the family. She is the only person who can do this for a couple of reasons. First of all, she is a mother and a wife. She is the person who serves as the core of the nuclear family. While John interacts with Celia and Alec, he does not interact much with Michael. In fact, Margaret has to ask him to spend time with Michael while they are on vacation. He never says that he will. Secondly, she is the one who can tell readers about the history of Michael's mental illness as she was the one who made the decision to marry John in spite of his mental state.

Her story about her time with John introduces one of the novels themes – the tendency to care for a another is warranted regardless of the expense. Margaret is happy that in becoming engaged to John, she has escaped the plan her mother had for her. this fact alone could have made her decide to go ahead with the marriage when she hears about John's mental illness. There is more there, though. She does actually care about him. She visits him every day. She walks in the rain with him and she feels that this brings them closer, even though it is trying. Michael inherits his father's mental illness, they fight and at times she worries that John will go away again. At this point though, they have been together for seventeen years and have three children. She is still happy to be with him when things settle down.

The next chapter, though, told through the eyes of the only daughter in the family, Celia, shows that John realizes that he could go at any time and not necessarily due to natural causes giving his history. He wants to prepare his children for the possibility. The fact that Celia takes action and understands what he is doing shows that she is already the mature, goal-oriented person she grows up to be. Alec's reaction characterizes him as someone who is insecure, needs reassurance, and is often not in control. This characterization continues when he allows Michael and Celia to leave him in the cave for quite some time and he comes to Celia's room for protection when their parents fight.

Another theme that emerges in this section is that of how being a member of the community can both lift and ruin the lives of individuals involved. Readers already see this in Margaret's nuclear family. They are happy times. She gives John support. There



are, however, bad times. Margaret and John fight. The children feel the effect and Michael has inherited the mental illness that runs in his community.

Michael brings up how he thinks that community, created by race, makes the man who gave him his snake sad. Michael thinks that he bolsters himself by creating another community - the one made up of his reptiles. My nature this community can literally ruin him if they were to attack. As he would like more money to grow his business, they could also ruin him financially.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Margaret married John even after finding out that he suffers from depression? In your opinion, was marrying John a wise decision? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Is Margaret happy with her life? Support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Why does John not spend time with Michael? Do you think this is a good thing for both of them?

Vocabulary

glistened, mutter, contemplating, bound, menagerie, preparatory, enervates, beguiled, askew, provisional, presumption, posturing, starkness, tarnished, blandishments, distilled, contemplating, ruminates, protozoan



Section 2: Part 1 (Michael, Alec, John)

Summary

In the first chapter in this section, Michael writes a series of letters to his Aunt Penny about their sea voyage to England. In his letters, he tells her that Alec is lost for most of the voyage and adds to that tales of the boat going through a hurricane, sex trafficking, and diseases.

In the next chapter, the family now lives in England. The children are adjusting to their lives there. John is unemployed and picks Alec up for school. As the chapter opens, Alec is naked in the bathroom. The bathroom door is hard to open, but he realizes that it would only take one hard push to open it and whoever did would find him naked. The thought excites him. He pretends to not be able to get out of the bathroom. First, he gets his mother's attention and then Celia's and Michael's. He still pretends that he is stuck inside the bathroom. He asks about the whereabouts of his father and finds out that he is in bed. Finally, Margaret, who is trying to prepare a meal, tells the kids to get their father. This causes Alec to get dressed, but he still does not open the door thinking that this will make his father get out of bed. John comes to the door and tells him how to open it. When Alec claims that he still cannot do so, John says that he is going to knock the door down. The news makes Alec open the door.

In the next chapter, John discloses that things had not gone well for them in England. He is fired and they go back to Boston, albeit now they live in a different city. Michael had come with them, but had not adjusted well, so he had returned to England to live with one of his friends. John gets a job in Boston, but loses it 18 months later. Depression descends upon him again and he spends a lot of time in bed. He finally gets up though, starts eating with the family again, and takes long walks in the woods. On this particular day, he walks into town and goes to the store Alec works in (the children have part-time jobs to pay for things they want). He takes him to lunch. Alec talks about asking for a raise, but John's response is flat. Alec notices and senses that something is wrong. He says that Margaret had said that John was better. Then one of Alec's friends comes in. The three go out together, but Alec and his friend walk behind John. The friend leaves and Alec catches up with his father. Alec says that he needs to go back to work, but John wants to continue to walk with him and says that he will explain why he is late. Alec says that he thinks John is acting weird and wants him to stop. He goes back to work.

When John gets back to the house, Margaret is upset because Celia did not go to work. Margaret thinks that she is with a boy she has been seeing and wants John to go to the boy's house. He suggests that she could be at track practice, causing Margaret to shout that school has been out for three weeks. John goes to look for Celia. He finds her boyfriend, but does not ask about what is going on between the two of them as Margaret wants. Instead he goes to the track where he finds Celia. She explains why she did not go to work and talks about how Margaret is watching her, but John is not



really listening as she talks. They drive and miss the turn for the house. He says that he has let them down and she says that that is not true. They sit through a storm and afterwards, return to the house. Later that night, Michael calls and talks about an exam he has to take. He talks to both Margaret and John who tells him that he will be fine.

The next morning, John gets up, goes to the woods, and commits suicide.

Analysis

Michael's first chapter in this section continues to characterize him. Even when nothing interesting is going on, his imagination runs wild. Readers also see how his mind does not work as John's did. John is quiet. He does not yell and get emotional like Margaret does when they fight. In contrast, Michael's mind races ahead and

continues to build upon itself. It is no wonder that that John does not spend time with him. Michael is almost too much for John's mind to handle.

Alec's chapter continues to characterize him. He is eager for attention, as his mother says when she tells John that Michael did not ask John to spend more time with him. He would no more ask as Alec would not stop asking. In this chapter, he uses being stuck in the bathroom to gain attention, but it might not be just to get anyone's attention. It may be specifically to get the attention of his father, knowing that if he pretends that he is stuck in the bathroom long enough, his father will come out. He wants this because John, in fact, has left them. His depression has come back and he has been spending time in bed. Alec asks for him and finally gets ready to come out of the bathroom by dressing. He thinks, "He would have to get up now. He'd have no choice" (75). In essence, he is shaking his father, trying to get him to come back to him as he did when he was younger on the boat and John told him to imagine that he was not there. Readers know that he can get out of the bathroom and he does all of a sudden when his father says he is going to break down the door.

John's chapter takes readers into his mind and characterizes him. It also confirms what readers suspect from the previous chapter. John is fighting his mental illness, which he calls the beast. This chapter helps readers understand why this has happened. It is not due to his family, yet it is due to his family. John says that his family will never know how they saved him. His family is his community. At the same time, though, he feels as if he has failed them due to his job losses. When we go see Celia Sylvia and she asks about his job he replies, "I don't work there anymore. The fact is, I've let you down" (101). She says he has not done so, but he thinks that she is just saying that to be nice to him. This conversation comes as precursor to Celia's vows as an adult. She is always looking for her boyfriend to do something to disappoint her. Could this be because this is what her father had done? She swears to never let a man leave her again.

Thus, the family saves John. However, due to his feelings that he has let them down, it also ruins him. The beast returns.



John also characterizes his children. Alec now has an actor in him. He tries to control people's impression of him. Celia is mature and learned to deal with life the way adults do by using discipline, drinking, and searching for someone to love her. In characterizing Michael, John explains why he stop spending time with him and lets readers know what they have already seen about Michael is what Michael is. "...and talks as fast as he as can be, not questions but endless invention, his imagination running out ahead of him, to make sure everything stays in motion, that he does not get stuck" (80).

John lets readers know what he plans to do when he says, "It's impossible, what I'm trying to do. To say goodbye without telling them I'm leaving" (101). It is interesting that from a stylistic viewpoint, when he dies, readers hear the echo of Michael's last thoughts, "... then please know that you'd you tried very hard indeed, and that you loved your family as deeply as you could" (7).

This chapter also focuses on the symbol of the beast. Up to this point, it attacks John and leaves scars. Now it is time for him to face his fears and the beast. Killing it means killing himself because the face of the beast is his.

Discussion Question 1

What do Michael's letters to Aunt Penny say about his personality?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Alec pretend to be locked in the bathroom?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think of John's way of saying goodbye to his children? Is he being selfish by committing suicide? Is suicide the best thing he can do for everyone?

Vocabulary

miffed, unbeknownst, controversy, conceivable, anemic, circumspect, petition, agrarian, intervention, presumably, confiscated, dilemma, crumpled, fiddling, sufficient, wielding, delineation, deprivation, murk



Section 3: Part II (Michael)

Summary

In Section 3: Part II, Michael is filling out a standard form in a doctor's office. He says he is there to solve several problems including fear, trembling, individualism, and white supremacy. He has two goals. He wants to achieve ordinary unhappiness and racial justice.

He gives his family's medical history more in terms of their psychological health and says that the only time he has stayed overnight in the hospital is at a CVS because he thought he had esophageal cancer.

His educational background consists of music. In grade school he was a fan of funk. It is through this type of music that he begins to think about meaning found in music and that, as black people sing most of it, black people might know about the need of what he calls "that meaning."

During his high school years, he moved to England and then back to the States less than three years later, only to move back to England because of the feeling of evil he felt in the woods where the family took their walks.

He still had to take his A-levels, but he is behind. One day, he goes to get his hair cut and meets a 25 year old, African American hairdresser named Angie. He instantly feels as if there is a bond between the two of them when she puts on the record "I Will Survive" and starts singing it. After that he pursues her. He drops off cassettes for her and tries to go on a date with her. He is in love. She tries to friend him off, but one evening they meet in the pub and she lets him kiss her. Afterwards they go out on what he thinks is a date but it is her way of letting him down softly. She gives him back his cassettes and tells him that the kiss was a mistake. The news devastates Michael. The next morning, he learns about his father's suicide. He tries to say goodbye to Angie, but a colleague tells him that he should leave.

A question about Michael's work history leads him to write about his relationship with a woman named Caleigh. In terms of work, Michael has spent his life either underemployed or unemployed. He did have a programming job in England, but he never went back to the field because his coworkers lacked style, good taste in music, and a sense of humor. He quits that job and takes one as a shop assistant so he can get good clothes which allow him to get into the clubs. He goes to the clubs to be there with the music, but he never dances. He likes living in England, but could not go to a good university there because of the results of his A-level exams. He ends up going to Boston College after a long wait to get in. He gets a job at a radio station. He starts to play the type of music he likes and people call in to ask where they can get the music.



In his junior year, Michael drops out of school and goes back to work at the bakery where he worked while he was waiting to get accepted into college. He has the morning shift and plays music. He also keeps his radio station job because the station manager does not know that he has dropped out of college. One day he notices that someone has a slot at a time that is even less popular than his. He wonders who it is. This is when he first meets Caleigh. He becomes obsessed with her, and while they become good friends and even have a sexual relationship, it turns out that she is a lesbian and finds a partner. The three of them form a reading group. As a result of this, Michael stumbles across a study about black teenagers who have recurring nightmares about slavery. He identifies the study as the work he is meant to do. He begins to track ghosts by ear.

During this time, he is also seeing his father's old psychiatrist, Dr. Gregory, who feels guilty's for his father death and does not charge him. His treatment involves lots of medication. Michael relies on this medication. In fact he gets to the point that he becomes immune to the dosage as he tries to use them to calm his anxiety. Caleigh has moved in with her partner and Michael moves in with one of Alex's old friends, Ben.

Michael works at an independent record shop and he gets along with Ben, but continues to call Caleigh and when he get cannot get her, he calls Celia or Alec as they understand him, but he wants them to think that he is getting better.

The time comes when the psychiatrist stops seeing him, but he still needs his medication so he finally asks his mother for money and he goes to see a new doctor at Boston City Hospital. The new psychiatrist increases the number of drugs he is already taking. When Michael turns 30, he applies to grad school but is rejected. At the same time Ben gets a girlfriend and she moves in with them. It gets to the point that no one knows what to say when Michael keeps on getting rejections from graduate school programs. The fact that Celia already has a Master's in social work and Alec has his journalism degree is not lost on him. Also, Celia seems to have no problems getting boyfriends after she dumps her previous ones.

Michael goes to a support group and is told to leave the house when he expects Caleigh to call and to look at his bills and figure out which ones that he needs to talk to his mother about paying. He does not do either one of these things.

He is shopping for records when he runs into a girl named Bethany.

Analysis

Once again, the author uses the confines of something formal that normally calls for a rather predictable response to show how Michael's mind works. Through it all he also lets readers know about Michael's life is and how he relates to none family members. This section also brings up the theme of the usefulness, or not, of medication to treat mental illness. One final theme is that of the community and how it influences its members.



This time, Michael is filling out a patient questionnaire at a psychiatrist's office. The fact is that he is there confirms the presence of the beast in him, as does his response. As do many of his chapters, the information at the beginning of the form looks normal. Once he lists individualism and white supremacy as two of the problems he is seeking help for, readers know that this is going to be another case of his imagination running in front of him.

In this chapter, Michael talks about meeting three women. Readers and others realize that they are unattainable and that this is going to add to his anxiety. Still Michael grabs hold of them, believing that they are the loves of his life and ends up, as he later says himself, suffocating them. In fact they become almost the same as drugs are to him. He cannot let go. The girls' initial reaction shows that he is a nice person, and Caleigh even remains a friend. His dependence on her is not good though, nor is it natural as the head of his support group realizes. When he goes there, he is told to leave the house when he expects Caleigh to call.

Adding to his anxiety, is the fact that he does not get into graduate school after continuous tries.

As Michael has to talk about his history with medication, readers find out that his father's doctor gives him medication. Michael says that maybe he gives him medication so readily because he feels guilty about John's death. Klonopin makes him happy. When he takes it, the present no longer feels like an emergency and he sees the world without dread. He can also complete thoughts and they leave before a new one comes. It also allows him to sleep. Most importantly for him, he can think about his fears without having anxiety attacks. The effect of the medication on Michael makes one wonder whether there is a role for medication in the treatment of mental illness.

Finally, Michael's fixation on the idea that black people suffer because of their community and shared history goes further as he looks for a connection for a meaning in the music he listens to and comes to the conclusion that something must be there because black people sing it and listen to it and he thinks that they should know something about the need for meaning. Bolstering his theory is a study about black teenagers having nightmares about slavery. Their community is bringing them down.

At the end of the chapter, he describes a girl he just met. This foreshadows another disappointment for him as readers know his history. When he says, "Need I say more?" (156), he does not.

Discussion Question 1

What do Michael's answers to the questions say about his character? Why do you think the author uses this format to tell Michael's story?



Discussion Question 2

Are pills the answer to Michael's problem? Support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Michael becomes obsessed with women he cannot have. Why do you think that he falls for these women? What is your prediction for his relationship with Bethany?

Vocabulary

supremacy, transitioned, decongestant, intuition, liberalism, compliance, vanished, enchanter, wherewithal, transformed, relented, bandwidth, consternation, contorted, gesture, legit, precepts, plaintively



Section 4: Part II (Celia, Alec, Margaret, Celia)

Summary

Celia is with a patient when Michael calls. She knows he is upset, but she tells him that she has to call him back. On the way home she thinks about how different Paul, her boyfriend, is from her father. He is a writer and has just finished completing the second act of the play that he is writing. One of the things that had attracted her to him was that he had seduced her. She likes being the object of his desire and feels safe knowing that he will not leave her. She goes running after she gets home. When she comes back, Paul is cooking. He fixes dinner, but she does not get to eat it because Michael calls. He is having an anxiety attack due to Bethany. He wants to go to see her because she did not show up for a date, but Celia convinces him not to go. By the time she is finished with the call, Paul has finished eating. She packs her food away and does not eat.

In the second chapter of this section, Alec catches a train after signing for an apartment that is too expensive for him. On the train, a man sits next to him. They test each other and realize that there is a mutual attraction. When they get off the train, they have sex in the man's car.

In the next chapter, Margaret finds out that Celia has made an appointment for the family to go to a therapist to talk to him about their situation. The children also take her to a restaurant that she thinks is far too expensive. During the dinner, Celia tells everyone about the family's appointment. Margaret gets upset and says that she is sure that everyone is going to blame her for the problems. She says and that she should have sold the house. Alec jumps to her defense and says that she should not sell the house. He also explains to Michael that she is still paying for the house and cannot keep paying for his student loans. When the bill comes Alec has to go to his car to get cash because the credit card he tries to pay with has reached its limit.

In the next chapter, the family performs the holiday rituals with Aunt Penny. Paul comes later. He and Celia discuss her pregnancy. They do not come to any conclusion and decide to talk about it the next day. When they return, Celia finds out that Michael is upset because he called Bethany and she told him that it was over between them and she does not want to talk to him anymore. Celia goes up and talks to him and ends up making him feel better.

Later, Celia confides in Alec and tells him that she is pregnant. She also realizes that John would have liked Paul. At the end of the conversation, Alec says that he loves her.



Analysis

The first chapter in this section shows how Celia is dealing with relationships as an adult. The patterns that began to form when she was a child still exist. She looks for her boyfriend to disappoint her as her father did. The fact that she is an object of his desire attacks her to him as does the knowledge that he is loyal. He will not leave her. She feels safe with him as she did not feel safe with her father. Still, the fact that they do not eat the dinner he prepared together shows that there is an element of strain in their relationship. Meal times are times of gathering and community. Paul is trying, but he is not yet a part of Celia's community. Michael is. He is a member of her nuclear family. Thus she chooses to help Michael instead of eating with Paul. Yet she is trying to change because at the end of the chapter, she is hungry when she tastes the meal she did not eat under his tongue. She is hungry for a change in their relationship that takes it to a higher level.

The fact that she is with Paul and worries about his sugar levels, supports Michael, and wants to help strangers supports the theme that the tendency to help people is warranted even though it may come at an expense. All of these activities cause stress. In fact she wants to quit her job her current job because she wants to be part of her clients feeling better and her current job does not allow her to do that. Caring about Paul's health, Michael's mental stability and her clients have to be a downside, but she is willing to continue to do it all.

Alec's chapter shows how his father's leaving him as influenced his life. He looks for one night stands, and even less as he demonstrates on the train. He also shows how he is like his father in that he shows off. He applies for an apartment that he cannot really afford. Part of Alec's problem could be the fact that he was never able to get his father's acceptance, especially in terms of his sexuality because he died too early. He is still looking for affirmation in some way that he is a good guy and everything is okay.

The final two chapters in this section show the interaction of the nuclear family and continue to characterize the members of the family, basically through the eyes of Margaret. She focuses on Alec more than anyone as he is the one most vocal about the financial burden Michael is placing upon her. He is now trying to take control, something that he's not done as a child. Margaret's current financial situation is an example of how a community can both help and ruin its members. Margaret is trying to help Michael, but it is ruining her financially. Alec, in turn, is trying to bolster her.

Finally, readers find out that they were right in thinking that Michael's relationship with Bethany will cause more anxiety for Michael. And everyone's attempt to help him shows the community trying to help the individual. At the end of the section, Alec lifts Celia by telling her that he loves her when she tells him that she is pregnant.

Discussion Question 1

How patient would you be with Michael if you were Paul? Explain your answer.



Discussion Question 2

Is Celia right to not eat Paul's dinner because she takes Michael's call? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Alec would have started his string of one-night stands if John were still alive? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

gazing, domestic, encompassed, deliberation, discrete, desperation, squabbled, motivation, momentarily, immiserating, baited, discerningly, insanity, immunity, vicious, disembarking, anesthesia, disproportionate, indignation, sophisticated



Section 5: Part II (Michael), Part III (Alec, Michael)

Summary

The family goes to their therapy session where Michael relays details as if they are a combat unit. He says that their mission is to have better communication and to achieve well-being for the family. While they are there, Alex says that he is gay. Margaret's body language shows that she is not happy that he has shared this publicly.

Gus, the therapist, then asks Michael what he has to say as he has not said much. Michael knows he can talk about Bethany now. Instead, he says that he agrees with Cecilia. They should add the effects of the past on the family.

Later in the session, everyone (except for Michael) talks about their memories of John. They start to cry. Alec thinks that maybe he could have stopped John from committing suicide if he had gotten up early that morning, but Margaret tells him he cannot think like that. Then, everyone starts to talk about how they worry about Michael. The session ends with Gus being pleased with their progress and the family going out to eat.

In the next chapter, Alec is at the apartment of a man named Seth. Seth is different from other men that Alec has been with in the past because he holds Alec's hand. This is the first time someone with whom Alec has had such an encounter has actually touched him. They keep on seeing each other and start dating. Still, Alec worries that they will go back to their old behavior at some point and start Internet dating again. As time goes on, though, neither of them does this. They proclaim their love for each other.

In the meantime, Michael finally gets into grad school. He has a stipend, but he still needs loans. Margaret co-signs for him. Alex does not like this, but he knows there is nothing he can do. The only thing left is to get Michael to his new apartment in Michigan. On the same weekend that he is supposed to go to see Seth's family, Alec agrees to take Michael to his new apartment in Michigan. Seth understands.

While he is with Michael. Alec tells him about Seth, something that he feels is okay to do now that he is in grad school and has something for himself. During their meal together, Alec also asks Michael what he thinks about his articles. Before telling him that he thinks his writing is good, Michael lectures Alec on how he has had advantages that black people do not have. During the entire trip. Alex feels as if he is babysitting.

Graduate school is not what Michael had envisioned it would be, and he begins to fall behind in his coursework. He also has to adjust to living alone. All of this makes him take more medication. His new psychiatrist, though, does not give him the refills he is accustomed to getting. He is so desperate at one point that he goes to her house. Still she does not give him more medication. After this incident he he ends up calling



Bethany because he cannot talk to Caleigh or his family members. She talks to him and he finds out that she's engaged to a woman. He ends up using alcohol to replace the medication that he does not have. He goes to the house of the student he has been tutoring, Jaylen. He has built a relationship with him based on music. He has also been over to their house for dinner and to make Jaylen's mother feel more comfortable about him spending time with him. Michael tells her that he has children. While he is at Jaylen's house, Michael realizes that he is not well. He spends time in the hospital.

Analysis

Michael once again takes reality and embellishes it with his imagination. This time, Michael compares the family's appointment with a therapist to a military operation. By making this comparison, he is saying that the family must stay together if it is going to function at its highest potential. This notion supports the theme of the community bolstering its members. If the unit does not work together, however, it can ruin its members, even causing their death.

The meeting also shows that even though John thought that he had prepared everyone for his absence, he had not. In fact, Celia thinks that they need to break through the effects of the past for the family to heal. Alec reveals to Gus that he is gay and has had to struggle with this all by himself due to the fact that John's suicide has been the more important issue. In addition, he never had the blessing of his father when it came to his sexuality due to John's early death. Alec also feels guilty for not getting up early and stopping John from killing himself. This could be one of the reasons that he tries to control things now.

The therapist thinks the family has made progress. Indeed, after this session, life moves forward for both Alex and Michael. Alec meets someone in his usual matter, but this time it is different. When the man, Seth, shows his interest in Alec, Alec does not run away although he still thinks in the back of his mind that things may come to an end. In addition, Seth, like Celia's boyfriend Paul, is not yet part of the community. Alec goes to take Michael to graduate school instead of meeting Seth's family. Still, he takes a step towards making Seth a part of the community by telling Michael about him. The fact that he has not told him up to this point shows the tight bond of the family. He waits until Michael has something that boosts him before telling him.

By the end of the chapter, the question about the role of medication arises again. Once again, Michael finds another person to whom he can attach, but this is not enough. He wants more medication, but his new doctor does not give it to him. He turns to alcohol and ends up in the hospital. The doctor's refusal to give Michael more medication and Michael's admission into the hospital bring several questions. Was the doctor right in not giving him the medication he requested? If she was going to withdraw his medication, should she have implemented some other type of treatment? Did she do so, and it did not work? Could medication for Michael really be the right form of treatment for him?



It is also important to note how the family eats together. As meals symbolize bonding, they attempt to do so after the therapist session. In addition, Alec works to bond with Michael over a meal. It is at this time that he tells Michael about Seth and he finally asks him what he thinks about the articles he writes.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the family so excited that Michael gets into graduate school? Do you think that there is a way that it could have worked out better for him than it did? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 2

What role do you think Michael plays in Alec's life? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Michael attached himself to Jaylen and not a woman as he has before? Do you think he could be interested in Jaylen's mother? Support your answers.

Vocabulary

regulation, maneuvered, rendezvous, engagement, resignation, lamentation, sequence, mesmerizing, beckoning, attrition, awkwardness, intimidation, deception, melancholic, interlaced, knuckling, disastrous, guilelessness, implausible, flagrant, credentialed



Section 6: Part III (Margaret, Cecil, Michael, Alec)

Summary

The story moves forward about ten months. Michael is back living with Margaret. He has had to spend time in the hospital before coming home. Margaret is paying his hospital bills. The financial stress has made her talk to a real estate agent about selling the house. Michael is now taking additional drugs that cause him to gain weight. She tries to take him for walks. When he walks, he always takes his messenger bag.

One day Margaret plans to go to lunch with Suzanne and she needs to use Michael's car. He goes along with her. He has a sticker on his car which she hates due to its negativity. At one point she stops to remove it. It makes him mad. This makes her happy because she thinks he's going to stand up to her. Then, however, he scrapes the rest of it off. Margaret hides her disappointment.

Once they get into town Michael tells his mother that he will get back home on his own. She goes to meet Suzanne who tells her why Michael focuses so much on the misery of others. She says that for him, it is a form of identification. He sees himself in the misery of others. After lunch, she sees Michael handing out pamphlets. She leaves him. Later that evening, he says he cannot breathe and wants her to call the ambulance. She does not do it. She holds him and gets him to drink a hot toddy and relax.

In the next chapter, Celia is with Paul's friends. They are married and have a baby. Celia talks to Kyle about how things are in their life since the arrival of the baby. In regards to her own pregnancy, Celia has she decided to get an abortion, but has not told Paul's friends about it. As they talk, they agree that Paul is moody, but loyal. They go to a museum. Celia goes off on her own and thinks about Michael.. She and Alec have stepped back from him. She knows that she has received calls from him, but has not answered them. She comes across a portrait that reminds her of John. Later, the phone rings again. It is Alec. He tells her that Margaret had called him the night before to tell him about Michael's episode. She also told him that she is trying to sell the house. He says that they have to stop her and goes on to say that Michael needs to come off his medication. He wants to take Michael to the cabin where they spent their summer vacations to help get him off his medication. He says that it is best time for him to do it because he has been laid off for a month. Celia imagines that it can really happen. Later that night Paul proposes to Celia.

In the next chapter, Michael is responding to a forbearance letter, and once again his imagination takes over.. Basically, in the end, he says that he cannot pay the loan alone.

In the next chapter, Alec and Michael go to the cabin to try to get Michael off his medication. Michael has agreed to give up everything except for Klonopin.



Seth is not happy about what Alec is doing this time because he and Alec had planned to spend time together during this period of time. When he leaves, Michael promises to call him. When Michael gets to the cabin, he finds that the landline works, but there is no cellular reception.

On the first night, Michael gives Alec all of his medication to Alec. When Alex says that it is the best thing, Michael responds that he is not sure. In the morning, Alec wakes up feeling more rested than ever and has a conversation with Michael that he thinks shows that Michael is improving. Michael says that he feels terrible.

Michael works out, but it does not make him feel better. Alec points out though that he is more alive than he was when they got there and discusses him coming off the Klonopin. Michael says that doing so would put him in the hospital, but he does ask Alec if he thinks he can do it. The next morning he asks Alan to get rid of the alcohol because he thinks he will resort to it if he cannot get his medication. Alec only hides the alcohol in the shed, but tells Michael that he has gotten rid of it. Then he starts cutting Michael's use of Klonopin. Michael starts having problems sleeping. Alec continues to lower the doses and Michael suffers. During this time Alec still thinks Michael is coming back to him.

As time goes on, Alec stops calling people and returning calls. Finally Celia gets through. Michael says that it is tough, but Alec is with him. She reminds Alec that Michael is not going to get within a month. Michael continues to suffer and finds the alcohol. He drinks it like it is water. The two brothers have a talk. Michael says that he cannot have a life like Alec and Celia which is the life they want him to have. He realizes that he suffocates those he loves, but it is the way he is. During the evening, Alec gets Michael to dance. He then asserts himself and says that he has to sleep. Alec goes to bed, leaving Michael up alone. The next morning, he finds him dead.

Analysis

This section shows the negative effects of Michael's medication. Even though Michael ends up in the hospital because he does not have his medication and his doctor admits that she took him off one medication too soon, Michael's current medication shows the trade-off patients may have to make. Yes, he is calmer, but his new medication has negative effects. The drug he is on in the hospital makes him sleep. Then he starts to gain weight and the weight does not look good on his frame. Margaret even wonders about its usefulness, "This is the medication they give to a man trying to regain his confidence? (273) He still suffers from anxiety. He starts to carry a bag with his medication because he may need something and not have if he suffers from an anxiety attack. He even thinks that he cannot breathe and begs his mother to call an ambulance. She realizes that he is having an anxiety attack and manages to calm him.

The interaction between Michael and his mother continues to highlight the theme that the tendency to help others is warranted even though it comes at an expense. When Michael has to leave graduate school, there is no question that he will come to stay with



Margaret. She agrees to pay his hospital bills so that he can get the treatment he needs. While she is not happy with the physical effects of his medication, she admits that he is calmer. It turns out though, that helping him is draining her emotionally and financially. When he has his anxiety attack, she says that he needs to rest and so does she. Taking on his debt is making it harder and harder for her financially.

In this section, Margaret takes a bumper sticker off of Michael's car that she hates due to his negativity. He tells her that that is the title of a song. It is interesting that Suzanne, someone Margaret does not think is very smart, is the one who tells her that Michael focuses on the misery and suffering of others because he is looking to identify with someone. He seeks to see himself in their shoes. His bumper sticker is an example of this. It is the title of a song. He looks for meaning in music. This is the title he chooses to use as a bumper sticker because he can identify with it.

In this section, Alec makes a breakthrough in his personal life and so does Celia. In fact, both she and Alec have already begun to expand their community by making time for their significant others and their communities and not always being there for Michael. They do not always answer Michael's calls. In doing so, Caleigh spends quality time with Paul's friends - a community that she and Paul both share. This community bolsters her and due to its influence, she gets engaged.

Alec, in his effort to control things and steer the impression of others is not quite at Celia's level which it comes to letting others in. Before he can do that he needs to bolster everyone in his community. His plan is to do that by helping Michael get off his medication so that he can become a functional member of society. He thinks that this will give Michael what he wants and will help his mother. His plan, however, comes at the expense of Seth. He and Seth were supposed to spend time together during this period. Seth though, is still outside of his community, so he pushes him aside. His actions are in contrast to Celia's. She has embraced a community that is outside that of her nuclear family. She therefore, imagines that Alec's plan will work, even though she knows that he will not be able to achieve his goals in a month.

The attempt to get Michael off his medication, and the result, shows that not only can medication be necessary to treat the mentally ill, but also the understanding that the help they really need may be to learn how to deal with themselves as they are. Alec, like Celia, thinks that problems arise from the past. Alec thinks that he has found the answer for Michael when Michael says he suffocates people. Michael also tells Alec how guilty he felt about going to England without warning the family of the evil he felt. All of this is not enough to release him, though. Michael understands himself better than his family, even though he wants what they want for him as did John. Like John, also, the family that support him also ruins him. Michael even tells Alec that he is not listening. The community tries to bolster him, but instead its lack of understanding of what he really needs ruins him.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think? Is medication necessary in Michael's case? Support your response.

Discussion Question 2

Margaret has spent her life helping people with mentally illness. Would you go as far as she has gone? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Was Alec's move to get Michael off medication the only option the family had? Should they feel guilty about Alec's death? Support your opinion.

Vocabulary

withering, avoidance, sympathetic, burrowed, sequestered, assuage, antipsychotic, concave, encased, contemplated, insistent, adhered, vandalizing, unmoored, wheezing, desperate, relentlessly, contentedly, bleating, suffice



Section 7: Epilogue (Celia, Alec, Margaret)

Summary

When Celia hears the news about Michael, she thinks about her determination to never be with a man who would leave her. She says that this was caused by her old boyfriend, Jason, who had walked away from her after her father's death.

People mourn Michael's death. Caleigh comes to be with the family, and Celia finally tells her mother that she and Paul are engaged. She takes time off work. When she goes back, she realizes that she has to give up her own need to cure and find the one answer which is what she had been trying to do in the past and with Michael. The only way that she can help patients is by helping them accept themselves as they are.

Alec finally goes to meet Seth's family. They accept him, and Alec tells Seth's father that he loves Seth.

At the end of the novel, Margaret has moved, and her old friend Dorothy lives nearby. On the eve of Celia's wedding, Paul and Celia are at Margaret's house as well as Seth and Alec. Aunt Penny also comes. During the wedding, Margaret thinks about the time when she first met John. However, she does not think about it with sadness. Instead, she looks at it in terms of the wonder of what happened afterwards.

Analysis

While the family was stuck after John's death, Michael's death seems to set them free. He has, in fact, done more than John did to prepare them to move on after his absence, even though John thought he had done a good job in preparing them and had set out to do so. In reality, John might have prepared them to exist, but Michael taught them that there is no one answer in the past that will solve their issues in the present. He releases what he has been holding onto, leaving the family when he senses evil in the woods without warning them. Still, he dies because no one has helped him live with himself as he is. The family seems to realize this after he dies and in doing so, learn how to live with themselves how they are. Celia gets married. Alec proclaims his love for Seth and Seth's father. And Margaret sells her house.

A new community forms. The book ends with the hope that this community will boost the members it supports. Margaret is also finally able to do what one should do when someone they have come to rely on is gone. When she looks back, it is not with sadness. It is with wonder for what came of it all.



Discussion Question 1

Do you think that it was only Jason that caused Celia to vow to never let a man leave her again? Support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

What does the inclusion of people outside the nuclear family at the end of the family at the end of the novel indicate?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the family seems to be able to move on after Michael's death, but they were not as successful after John's death?

Vocabulary

distraction, malignancy, generous, conveniently, rummage, instability, imminent, bewilderment, wonder.



Characters

Michael

Michael is the oldest son of John and Margaret. Celia and Alec are his siblings. As the novel progresses he has crushes on three women: Angie, Caleigh, and Bethany. He is the only child of the three who inherits John's mental illness. There is a difference between the two of them, though while John's mind shuts down, Michael's races and he suffers from anxiety.

He takes solace in music and the women he becomes obsessed with. He also looks to the suffering of others to find meaning in his own suffering. His focus is on the suffering of slaves.

Many of the events in Michael's life add to his anxiety. He falls in love with women he can never have. Two of them, Caleigh and Bethany are lesbians. Bethany is much younger than he is when they meet. Angie is much older and is married. While she and her husband are separated with they first meet, they are working on getting back together.

He also has problems with his studies. He chases Angie instead of studying for his A-levels. This causes him not to do well on them which causes him to have a hard time getting into college. He also has a hard time getting into graduate school, while Celia and Alec both have their degrees and work in their fields. His inability to get a good job means that he cannot pay back his loans. He hides his bills and his mother pays the ones she knows about. All of this leads him to worry that things will never change for him and he will be alone.

Medication is key to Michael's existence. He falls apart when he does not have it. This is the case when he is in graduate school and his doctor does not give him the medication he requests. He needs something and turns to alcohol. The event causes him to have to spend time in the hospital to recover. When Alec suggests that they go to the cabin together to try and get him off his medication, he is wary because he knows himself better than his family members do. He knows that they want him to be like them, but he knows that it is impossible for him to do so. He tries, though, because he wants for himself what they want for him. He wants to believe that it can be so, even though he knows that it cannot be.

The message he leaves his family is that improving one's present is not as simple as looking into one's past and finding the one thing that makes them what they are today. Instead people need to learn to live with themselves as they are today, in the present.



Alec

Alec is the youngest son of Margaret and John. Michael and Celia are his siblings. He is gay and Seth is his partner. While he does not suffer from mental illness like his brother and father, he does tend to worry about money, his mother and politics. He also works to control how people think of him and tends to spend money on what he thinks he should have even though he cannot afford it. He puts a deposit on an apartment in New York that is over his budget. He insists that his mother eats an expensive dinner and tries to put it on his maxed out credit card. In this way, he is like his father.

He has commitment problems until he meets Seth. Up until this time he found comfort in one night stands. When Seth plays music for him and holds his hand, he touches him both literally and figuratively.

In trying to help both his mother and Michael, he comes up with the idea to try to get Michael to come off his medication. He is idealistic, though, and unlike Celia, does not understand the extent of Michael's problem.

Celia

Celia is the daughter of John and Margaret. Her brothers are Michael and Alec. Paul becomes her husband at the end of the novel.

As a child she is close to Michael. On vacation she follows him in a game in which they leave Alec in a cave. At the same time, though she protects Alec who comes to her room when they hear their parents fighting. Later, she continues to work with the rest of the family to support Michael.

While she does not suffer from mental illness, the relationship between her parents and her father's mental illness influence her adult life. John realizes that even as a teenager, she is able to see him clearly and that she has learned to adapt as an adult, "discipline, drinking, and the search for someone else to love her" (99). She also runs. While her running can be a release, a way to relax in a tense household, it could also be her way of running away from it. Also has a teenager, she makes the decision that no man will ever leave her after her boyfriend walks away from her. Thus, she leaves them and easily picks up new ones.

Even when she settles down with Paul, she looks for ways for him to disappoint her. She feels safe with him because he is loyal. She grows throughout the novel, however. Seeing the relationship between Paul's friends allows her to see that things do not have to be as they were with her parents. She starts talking about marriage, leading Paul to ask her to marry him. In her work, she realizes that spending time delving into the past of her patients is not helping them deal with the present.

Overall, Celia is mature and strives to make the family work. She makes an appointment for the family to go to therapy. She does her best to support Michael during



his anxiety attacks. She also tries to help others as a social worker, as she is, perhaps, trying to find her own answers.

Margaret

Margaret is John's wife and the mother of Michael, Celia, and Alec. She has a sister named Penny. She meets John in England, finds out that he suffers from depression, but decides to marry him anyway. They are already engaged when she finds out and her decision could be related to this fact and her happiness that she was the not "doll in the house" (19) of her mother's imagination.

In England she is seen as the "pushy American" (21) and in her family she tries to control things. She does not like the fact that John waits until the last minute to confirm the dates that they are to have the cabin. The children say their parents fight a lot and they blame her more than John.

Still, she tries to do the best for her children. She takes on Michael's bills. When Celia chides Alec for chiding Michael for letting Margaret pay his bills, Margaret agrees with Celia, but does not say anything to protect Alec. She does not tell Alec about her plans to sell the house because she knows it will upset him.

She seeks solace in her work at the library. While during the novel, she tends to think that the children think that everything is her fault, as shown during their family therapy appointment. She seems to be uptight when she talks about Suzanne as if they are complete opposites. By the end of the novel, she appreciates what her union with John produced.

John

John is Margaret's husband and Michael's, Celia's, and Alec's father. He suffers from bouts of depression. He is British, but due to his work, lives in both England and the United States with the family. John is a kind man who is a product of England, but he appreciates the freer attitude in the United States. He tries to help small businesses.

He is playful with the kids, but he spends a lot more time with Alec and Celia than with Michael. Alec and Celia do not inherit his mental illness, but Michael does. John does not seem to know how to deal with him. They stopped having conversations when Michael realized that his questions were childish and stopped asking them out loud and when John's attempts to help him when he had problems with the children at school only made things worse.

He and Margaret fight a lot, but he tends to be the quiet one during the fights. When they are young, the children see Margaret as the aggressor although John defends her.

While John fights to ward off his depression, things do not go well after they move back to England and then back to the United States and he becomes unemployed.



Depression grips him again and he feels as if he has let everyone down. He decides to end it all by committing suicide.

Caleigh

Caleigh is the second woman Michael becomes obsessed with. She is a disk jockey at the radio station he works. They spend time together and have sex. They have nicknames for each other, but she is a lesbian. She meets a woman and begins a relationship. She still tries to include Michael as much as she can. When Michael has anxiety attacks, he often calls her and she tries to help him. She becomes a close family friend and attends Celia's wedding at the end of the novel.

Bethany

Bethany is the last woman Michael becomes obsessed with. When he meets her she is just turning twenty and he is in his thirties. She has her own issues as she had just gotten out of a psyche ward when they meet. While they spend a lot of time with each other right after they first meet, she does not show up for their next date, causing Michael to have an anxiety attack. He worries that something has happened to her and wants to go to her house, but Celia and Caleigh convince him not to go. Later, she moves to Cleveland to be with her parents. He calls her at Christmas, and she tells him that it is over between the two of them, sending him into depression. Later, when he is in grad school, he calls her and finds out that she is better and is engaged to a woman.

Paul

Paul is Celia's live-in boyfriend. He is a screenwriter and has two good friends, Laura and Kyle, who are the parents of a nine-month-old child. He is nothing like Celia's father, John, which is not a problem for her. His assertiveness when they met attracted her to him and she knows that he is loyal. He will not leave her. She had vowed a long time ago not to be with a man who would leave her. Still, she tries to find things about him that disappoint her or inadequacies in him.

For his part, Paul does not easily give in to her. His job is really screenwriting and he does not readily accept the idea of anything that forces him to work full-time, such as her wish to quit her job and her pregnancy. By the end of the novel though, he proposes to her and she accepts. It has taken him this long to propose to her because of her feelings about marriage. It seems though, that spending time with his friends helps to change her view of marriage as before she had based everything on her parent's marriage.



Seth

Seth is Alec's partner. They meet through the Internet, but the thing that makes him different from others Alec has met this way is the fact that he plays a song for him and the two hold hands as they listen to it. He actually touches Alec. Seth is supportive when Alec takes Michael to Michigan instead of going to meet his family, but he is not happy when he goes to the cabin with Michael to get him off of his medication instead of spending time with him as they had originally planned. At the end of the novel the two are a couple and Alec tells Seth's father that he loves him.

Angie

Angie is an African-American hairdresser who cuts Michael's hair when he lives in England. He falls in love with her when she puts on "I Will Survive" and starts singing it. He is studying for his A-levels and she is twenty-five-years old. She is also married, but separated from her husband when they meet. He begins to shower her with cassettes. She is nice to him, but when he tries to go on a date with her she does not respond, causing him to have an anxiety attack. When he runs into her at a pub, she does let him kiss her though. She realizes that this was a mistake, and it has gone too far between them. She tries to let him down easy by going out with him and telling him so. She also returns all of the cassettes. She is the first of the three women Michael obsesses over in this way. He tries to see her before he leaves England due to his father's death, but a colleague tells him to go away. Everyone except for Michael knows how unrealistic it is for him to have a relationship with Angie. Even his friend Simon tells him that she is too old for him and is still married.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Beast

A beast is something evil that attacks its prey. It evokes fear. When a beast attacks its prey, the prey tries to get away. Most of the time it does not. Even when it does, it may still suffer from the scars of the attack. In the novel, the beast symbolizes John's mental illness. It rears its head when it wants and John has to fight it off. There are times, though, when it wins and he has to recuperate in the hospital or his own bed. At the end of his life, John decides to face his fears and the beast. Killing it, though, means killing himself as the beast is within him.

The Lobsterman

The lobster symbolizes protection, discovery and rejuvenation. It is also a symbol of transformation and emotional growth. Alec brings Michael to the cabin with the hope of giving him a protective environment in which he can recover and get off his medication. He wants to rejuvenate him. However, when, Michael and Alec see the lobsterman, the symbol of rejuvenation, they ignore him. In fact the noise he makes while chopping wood annoys Michael. In essence, by rejecting the lobster man, Michael is rejecting everything the lobster represents.

When Michael dies, Alec is about to continue on this trajectory, but he turns back and goes to talk to the lobsterman, thus igniting his own journey of transformation and emotional growth. Before this period of time, he has one night stands with strangers. When he starts dating Seth, he still feels insecure in the relationship, thinking that one of them will go back to Internet dating or that Seth is seeing someone else when he is out of town.

After making contact with the lobsterman, Alec's transformation begins. He takes the big step of meeting Seth's family and openly declares his love for him to Seth's father. He not only takes him to Celia's wedding, but the two of them also stay in his mother's house. Connection with the lobsterman allows Alec to lose the insecure feelings he has about his relationship with Seth and move on to the emotional growth he needs to find fulfillment.

Alec's Name

Alec is a short form of the name Alexander which is associated with the meaning of a helper of mankind. Alec plays this role throughout the novel. He writes for a political magazine, thus trying to inform people. He tries to help his mother keep the house she loves so much by trying to help Michael become a functional member of society so that he will not have to rely on his mother for financial aid. He wants to help Michael return to



what he thinks is his real self and is willing to spend time with him to get him to this point.

Celia's Name

The name Celia is associated with the word "heaven." In fact, Celia, in her work as a social worker, tries to bring peace and tranquility to her clients and Michael.

Snow and the Thaw

Snow can represent hardship and death. Snowflakes can represent individuality. A thaw, can represent the beginning of new life or rejuvenation. It represents all of these elements in the novel. While Michael is still alive, snow falls. During this time, he suffers because he cannot take his medication and ultimately dies. Before he does so, he tells Alec that he cannot be like Alec and Celia even though they want him to be. Thus, he is asserting that he is different from them. He is an individual just like each snowflake is an individual.

A thaw takes place after Michael's death. Thaws represent new life and, indeed, Alec and his family experience a thaw when Michael dies. Alec finally meets Seth's family, declares his love for him to Seth's father, and brings him to Margaret's house and Celia's wedding. Celia gets married. Margaret sells the house and is happy in her new home. When she thinks of John at Celia's wedding, it is not in a sad way. Instead it is "in wonder at all that followed." (356)

Michael's Interest in the Suffering of Slaves

Michael's interest in the sufferings brought about by slavery symbolizes his own search for meaning as he, himself, suffers. Susanne tells this to Margaret when they meet each other for lunch. when she says that misery loves company in reference to Michael's interest in the suffering of others "He suffers. What I'm saying is, it's identification" (278).

The Family Reunion

Family reunions are a symbol of strength. When the kids come home, they come back to their roots. Normally during such reunions it is the parents who hold the family together and while Margaret is a force, the stronger force is Michael whom everyone tries to save. His existence roots all the family members. They stay together, but they do not grow. Once he dies, however, they branch out. Alec and Celia move forward in their relationships and Margaret moves to a new house that she is happy with. Now, when she thinks of John, she is not sad. Instead thoughts of him make her think of the wonder of what happened after she met him.



The novel depicts the evolution from the time the children were small and the family goes on a vacation together until the end of the novel when Celia gets married. The family tree now has branches which make the family unit stronger than it was before the new members become part of the family.

England and The United States

In the novel, England represents order and what is proper. In England there are right ways to do things and behave. The British do not tolerate behavior outside of their norm. John's mother never visits him when he is in the hospital. His illness is not British. The news of how John dies shocks Simon's parents. Michael likes living in England.

The United States represents the opposite. When the children do something that is not proper, John's mother blames Margaret because she is American.

Dancing

Dancing represents a coming together. It can also represent a courtship between men and women. Michael obsesses over the meaning of music, but he never truly connects with anyone through it because he does not dance to it. Thus, he does not really connect with people through music like he thinks he does. At the end of the novel, he connects with Alec when he dances with him.

Running

Celia runs, and running can have several symbolic meanings. Her runs symbolize that she is running away from something. As mental illness runs in her family and she has had experiences that she does not want to repeat in her relationships, she runs to run away from these elements in her life. When she runs, she is putting distance between herself and something that makes her uncomfortable.

The Cabin

The cabin symbolizes John's failure. The family could never afford such a place on their own. They are literary at the beck-and-call of the cabin's owners, even having to stay at a hotel when the owners come a day early one year.



Settings

The Cabin

The cabin belongs to one of John's partners. The family goes there for vacation when the children are small. Later, Alec goes there with Michael to try to get him off his medication. Michael dies there.

The cabin also has a symbolic representation as it symbolizes John's failure. The family could never afford such a place on their own. They are literally at the beck-and-call of the cabin's owners, even having to stay at a hotel when the owners come a day early one year,

The Woods

There are woods near the house the family has in the United States. The family takes walks there. Michael goes there and senses such evil that he leaves for London. John commits suicide there.

Margaret's and John's House When They Return From London the Last Time

This is the last house John lives in. Michael did not live in it for long during his teenage years as he left to go back to England (partly because of his fear of the woods). Michael returns there after he leaves grad school. The family gathers there for Christmas and Margaret's birthday.

The Train

Alec meets a man on the train and has sex with him in the man's car on his way to his mother's house for Christmas and to celebrate her birthday. While trains represent journeys, in Alec's case it is the train to nowhere as he continues to run away from commitment and is returning to his mother's house which holds the memory of his father's death.

Michigan

Michael goes to grad school in Michigan. He has to return home though after his new psychiatrist does not give him enough medication.



Themes and Motifs

The Tendency to Care for Another is Warranted Regardless of the Expense

When Margaret finds out that John suffers from a mental illness, she has a choice to make. She can either leave him or she can go ahead and marry him. She is trying to assess the situation when the doctor asks her if she loves him. When she nods, he says, "Well, then, that's how it should be" (22). She decides to go through with the marriage and cares for him. She goes to see him every day and walks with him in the rain.

Even when he gets better and they get married and have children, she has to remain vigilant. She says, "He has moods, and occasionally a stretch of a few weeks when I notice his energy flagging, and I don't suppose I'll ever be able to rid myself of the worry. I have them, that it will get much worse." (24) This is one of the expenses.

Yet, she feels that the "fear is also a kind of tenderness" (24). Margaret does not regret it. They have had a total of seventeen years together. Their marriage produces three children.. She sees that the natural tendencies to care for him has been warranted, even though it has not been easy.

Getting the family off on vacation when the kids are young frazzles Margaret. In addition to getting them ready and settled, she stresses because John does not verify the dates until the last minute. Still once things settle down, she is happy to be with him and says that "finding him is such relief " (31).

Even when John is about to commit suicide, he acknowledges how his family has kept him alive this far. "My family will never know how much they saved me " (92).

At the end of the novel, after Michael has died and Margaret is at Celia's wedding, she remembers her first time meeting John. She does not think of it in terms of sadness, though. She thinks of it in wonder of what followed. In the end, everything that she has done and all that she has gone through has been worth it even though it has come at an expense.

Treating Mental Illness with Medication

Michael seeks psychological help from his father's old doctor, Dr. Gregory. Throughout the novel, there is no evidence that the doctor gave John medication. After John's death, Dr. Gregory sees Michael for free and prescribes medication for him, a lot of it. Michael says that Celia and Alec see him as a "guilt-ridden pill pusher who sedated me to fend off his fear of losing another patient, rather than tackling the issues at hand" (147). Michael, however sees him as a humanitarian.



When Michael takes his first pill, he feels like a normal human being. He says that he was happier than he had rarely been. "For this hour and the three or four that followed, I was lifted down off a hook in the back of my skull that I hadn't even known I'd been hanging from. Here was the world unfettered by dread" (139).

When Dr. Gregory stops seeing Michael, his new doctor prescribes him even more medication. When he moves to Michigan, however, his new doctor does not give him the medication he needs and he ends up being admitted into the hospital. His doctor even admits that she took him off a medication too soon.

Still, the family believes that he can make it without his medication and while he agrees to try to do so without most of it, he wants to continue taking Klonopin and while he suffers without the others, it is to be reduction of Klonopin that drives him over the edge.

The novel tells two stories of people with mental illness. Looking at them the question arises as to whether medication is needed in certain cases. Was Dr. Gregory right to feel guilty for John's death? Would medication have helped him? Was there a happy medium between giving Michael medication and trying to get to the root of the problem as his family thinks? In Michael's case, it seems as if medication plays a role in keeping his anxiety at bay. Does medication, then, have a role in helping those with mental illness? Perhaps, the answer needs to be looked at on a case by case basis.

Effects of Being a Community Member

The nuclear family in the novel forms a tight unit. Even though John commits suicide, he says that his family saved him. After his death, the children are there for their mother and each other. Celia and Alec talk about their private lives with each other and provide support. When Celia tells Alec that she is pregnant, the conversation ends with him telling her that he loves her. Alec waits to tell Michael about his relationship with Seth because one of the bonds he has with him is that while Celia breaks up with men and easily replaces them with others, the two of them remain single. He finally tells him at a time when Michael has a success of his own, getting into graduate school.

Still, being in such a community can have negative consequences. John feels as if he is a burden to his family and has let them down, due in part to his inability to provide for the family. At the end of his life, everyone works except for him.

Michael carries a similar burden. He cannot be what his family wants him to be.

Margaret carries a big burden of guilt because she thinks that the children blame her for the family's problems. When Celia tells her that she has set the appointment for their family therapy session. Margaret says, "I will go along and receive my criticism" (186). When Celia tells the family about the appointment and they talk about patterns, she says, "and no doubt that's my fault," and goes on to say, "No doubt I was a wretched parent" continuing with, "and burdened you with all sorts of things I shouldn't have" (190). Her self-accusations are a burden in themselves and Michael tells her to stop talking like that.



Finally, both Celia and Alec have control issues that arise due to their family interactions. Celia makes a promise to herself not to be left by a man again. She makes this decision after Jason walks away from her. It is also, though, after her father dies. When he was young, Alec's elder brother and sister used to tease him. As he grows up, he tries to take control and worries about the image he projects to others, but never stays around long enough for any possible mate to see his true self, until he meets Seth.

Outside of the nuclear family, the novel touches on how being a part of a community identified by one's race can both support and wreck human beings. Michael sees music as something that connects and bolsters black people as they search for meaning. He finds answers in the rhythm and the lyrics. The music means so much to him that he does not see it as something one dances to. It is meant to be heard and understood. He believes that black people suffer because of their community and the effects of their past on the present. He tells his mother that he thinks the man who sold him his snake, who is black, is sad and wonders whether his father tried to help grow his business because of his race. He studies the ghosts found in the music that causes black teenagers to have dreams in which they see themselves as slaves. These images and memories wreck individuals.

The Effect of the Past on the Present

It is common to see past events influencing the present in novels. *Imagine Me Gone* is no different. Margaret's decision to marry John affects the entire family. She and the children may have prolonged John's life. Michael inherits John's mental illness. The children have control issues because of their past and all of those things influence their present lives. When one knows that they have issues due to their past, what do they do? Do they try to deal with their past and solve the problem or do they accept themselves for what they are today? The novel falls on the side of the latter.

In her practice, Celia spent time looking for clues into the past of her patients in order to try to cure them. She looked for an answer thinking that that would be what would make the patient well. All she had to do was find it. It is not until she goes back to work after Michael's death that she realizes the error in her approach. "because if all I did was scour what a person said to me each week for clues, I wouldn't do her much good" (338). She realizes that she had never done that with Michael. She was right in thinking that there was something in his past that he had to let go of, the fact that he had left the family without warning them of his vision of evil, but when he lets it go, he still dies. She realizes that there is no one answer. "As if it were that simple," she says (338).

They had all believed that there was one answer, even Michael who wants for himself what his family wants for him. Michael, though, seems to know that something is wrong with this approach. Alec has him do exercises, but Michael tells him it is not working for him. He tells Alec that one of his doctors thinks that his condition is so severe that he qualifies for disability. Alec, though, does not listen to him. He keeps pushing for what he thinks is best for Michael, thinking that something will click and then all of a sudden



things will be better. Finally Michael tells him, "You want me to have a life like yours. Like yours and Celia's" (328). He goes on to tell him that he wants that because they want it for him, but it is never going to happen. It just is not his life. He realizes that he suffocates the people he loves and that is nobodies fault. It is just the way it is.

Alex's response shows that he thinks that this may be what Michael has been holding on to and the past that he needs to let go of. Once he does, Alec thinks that he will be better. Michael knows better though and tells Alec that he is not listening.

It is after this conversation that he says he has to sleep and dies. No one is there to do what Celia later realizes is her real job - to shepherd him towards accepting who he already is. People are "haunted by the living as well as the dead" (339).

What To Do After Losing Something or Someone

The novel's title states one of its themes. *Imagine Me Gone*. What does one do when something or someone they have come to rely on is no longer there? The novel's message is that life goes and one needs to look at the good things that came about because of the relationship instead of looking back at it in terms of sadness.

John tries to give the children the ability to move on without him. He takes them on the boat and tells them to imagine that he is not there. What should they do? Celia, who matures quickly, gets it and tries to maneuver the boat. Alec looks to his father for support and cries when he does not get it. Later, before he dies, John thinks that he has prepared his children for his absence. He has fathered them in a way that he never was. Still, his death influences their adult lives. Celia leaves boy after boy because she does not want a man to leave her. Still she replaces them, a sign that she wants to be with someone. She looks to people to disappoint her, as she does with Paul. She stays with him, though, because she knows that he is loyal. Even though she matured early, she still looks for safety with someone.

Alec does not commit. He finds people that he knows are going to leave. So when they do, it does not upset him. Even when he meets Seth, he waits for something to happen that will cause him to leave. Finally though, at the end of the novel, they are able to move on in the way that John wanted them to. Celia marries Paul. Alec meet Seth's parents and declares his love for him and Margaret is able to sell the house. At the end of the novel, the family able to laugh when Alec says something that Michael would have said and Margaret remembers her first meeting with John, but not in sadness. Instead she remembers it with wonder for all that followed. This is the ideal.



Styles

Point of View

The author uses the first person narrative, switching between the members of the nuclear family: Margaret, John, Michael, Celia, and Alec. This approach is appropriate given the fact that the novel is the family's story and how they deal with the ravages of mental illness and answer the question of how far they are willing to go to save those whom they love. Who best to show the impact of this than the family members themselves? The point of view of Michael's narratives are done particularly well. His chapters show readers how his mind works. Encased in formats that should contain basic information, Michael's imagination runs wild. It shows his brilliance as well as his insanity.

It is interesting that Michael's chapters are true to his character and that in the end, he is the one who has faced who he is. He says that it is not anyone's fault. It is just the way it is. Margaret, Celia, and Alec, however, do not reach this point until the end of the novel. Thus, readers have to remember that they may be unreliable narrators as they tell their stories.

Language and Meaning

The level of difficulty of the language varies depending on who is "speaking." The entire family is educated. This is true of Michael as well, even though he does not have a degree to show it. Therefore, they use sophisticated vocabulary. Celia thinks that she is normal. One of her patients, however, points out to her that she is not. The vocabulary the family uses represents this.

While the language is sophisticated, it is still everyday language as the novel is about their lives, not their professions. Therefore, there is not much jargon. Some does exist in relation to mental illness. It is weaved well into the novel, and it is easy to derive the meaning of the words.

Structure

The book's distinctive structure feature five points of views, three sections, and a prologue and an epilogue. It moves from the present to a long flashback that moves readers to the point where the novel starts. Readers are taken from that place to the characters' present. Even though different characters tell the story, all of them, with the exception of Michael at times, move the novel forward. It is interesting that at times his chapters simply characterize him because he does not evolve. He is who he is. Margaret, Celia, and Alec do evolve. Readers see this evolution in their narratives.



Quotes

I'm not a doll in the house of my mother's imaginings.

-- Margaret (Part 1, Chapter 1 (Margaret) paragraph 27)

Importance: This quote gives readers some insight as to why she goes ahead and marries John after she learns about his fight with depression. Her engagement to John took her out of the mold of the expected and set her free. She has invested in him. When she hears about his illness, she takes the chance that once he recovers, he will not have a relapse as he had only been in the hospital once before years ago.

John friend's houses. That's where we spend all our vacations.

-- Margaret (Part 1, Chapter 1 (Margaret) paragraph 79)

Importance: This quote indicates that John has somehow disappointed Margaret in two ways. One is in that they cannot afford such a place themselves, but the other is also because he puts on airs and there is a disconnect between the picture John tries to create and the reality of their situation.

And Dad said, Imagine me gone, imagine it's just the two of you? What do you do?

-- Celia quoting John (Part 1, Chapter 2 (Celia) paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote provides an element of foreshadowing and brings meaning to the title. John tries to prepare the children to be independent and take care of themselves if he is not there. Later, when he commits suicide, he will physically not be there. He is also not there when the beast takes hold of him. He is in bed. He does not eat or interact with the family. Even though he is alive and in the house, he is still gone. He wants to prepare the children for this as well. This is what mental illness does to people. It takes them away from their loved ones and community.

But Celia's ways of coping are already the adult ones: discipline, drinking, the search for someone else to love her.

-- John (Part 1, Chapter 7 (John) paragraph 76)

Importance: This quote characterizes Celia. She is intelligent and mature. While readers do not know how much she drinks, she continues to be disciplined and to search for someone else to love her when she becomes an adult.

It's impossible, what I'm trying to do. To say good-bye without telling them I'm leaving.

-- John (Part 1, Chapter 7 (John) paragraph 87)

Importance: The quote foreshadows John's death, but it also shows how much he cares about his family even though his mental health problems haunt him.

On Christmas Eve 1992, I came down with a self-diagnosis of esophageal cancer requiring what amounted to an overnight stay in the decongestant aisle of a twenty-four-



hour CVS in Medford.

-- Michael (Part II, Chapter 1 (Michael) paragraph 11)

Importance: This helps readers see the extent of Michael's anxiety attacks.

I just needed to be the hurricane, in that storm blowing in from paradise, pushing skyward the wreckage of James Brown and George Clinton and the Jamaican dub masters and, yes, Giorgio Moroder, and the German industrialists, and all the forgotten producers and DJs who kept the ideas and the vinyl coming, vanishing mediators, of a culture too throwaway to chronicle.

-- Michael (Part II, Chapter 1 (Michael) paragraph 36)

Importance: Michael finds solace in music as he says in this quote. The writing style also shows how his mind works. He runs on and on because his mind works quickly and he tries to get everything out.

Here was the world unfettered by dread.

-- Michael (Part II, Chapter 1 (Michael) paragraph 68)

Importance: This quote shows how much better Michael felt when he first started taking his medication. This quote shows the role that proper medication can play in helping the mentally ill lead normal lives.

And really it was okay, and most often better than that, being the object of his desire, sensing he would never leave me. That we were safe.

-- Celia (Part II, Chapter 2 (Celia) paragraph 45)

Importance: This quote supports John's assessment of Celia. She looks for someone else to love her. In addition, she still holds on to the promise she made to herself when she was young. She promised herself that a man would never leave her again. Ironically, she has been left by two men in her own family: her father and Michael.

He's like his father: spending as if he has the natural right to live now as he plans to later.

-- Margaret (Part II, Chapter 4 (Margaret) paragraph 59)

Importance: This quote helps characterize Alec. Readers have just read about how true this is as Alec has just put in an application to rent an apartment that is over his budget. It is also reminiscent of the family vacations in which the family went to a house that belonged to John's friends. John, like Alec, tried to control how people thought of him.

He suffers. What I'm saying is, it's identification, all that reading he does.

-- Suzanne (Part III, Chapter 3 (Margaret) paragraph 50)

Importance: In this quote, Suzanne explains to Margaret why Michael gets caught up in the suffering of others and focuses so much on slavery and race relations.



I wished I had the money to send Michael off to some leafy clinic campus with nurses and massage and gentle yoga.

-- Celia (Part III, Chapter 4 (Margaret) paragraph 56)

Importance: This quote shows that Celia feels that there is nothing else she can do for Michael. She agrees to Alec's plan even though she questions it.