

In the Unlikely Event Study Guide

In the Unlikely Event by Judy Blume

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Plot Summary

“In the Unlikely Event” is a 2015 historical novel by Judy Blume which recounts three airline crashes in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in the winter of 1951-52, and the effect they had on the people living in the town. When the novel begins, the citizens of Elizabeth go about their lives normally. Christmas is coming, while Hanukah is underway. Miri buys her mother, Rusty, a half-slip while Ruby Granik, a dancer who is becoming famous, prepares to head to Miami for a show. Miri’s best friend Natalie Osner prepares for her birthday, while Natalie’s older brother Steve is expected to chaperone. Estelle Sapphire orders some compacts from Miri’s grandmother, a saleswoman, and tells her husband Ben to pick up her order.

As Miri and Rusty head out to a movie, the plane carrying Ruby crashes into the river, killing all on board. The people of Elizabeth are stunned. It is a tragedy unlike any other they have ever experienced. People react in different ways. Miri’s uncle, Henry, writes stories about the event for the newspaper. Natalie tells Miri she is hearing the voice of Ruby in her head, urging her to become a singer. Reading about Ruby in the papers, 18-year-old Christina realizes how short life is, and how important living one’s own life is. This will later help inspire her to date Jack – a boy who is not Greek, and who therefore does not meet with her mother’s approval. Miri’s Aunt Frekki, sister of her Miri’s who left while Rusty was still pregnant, suddenly shows up wanting to connect with Miri. Miri ultimately meets her father, but no real familial relationship ever develops. Miri begins dating a boy named Mason.

Steve, a senior in high school, begins dating Kathy, a freshman in college at Syracuse. Kathy flies home for break after exams in January. Her flight becomes the second plane to crash in Elizabeth, destroying an entire block and killing several residents. Steve is sickened and heartbroken, and finds comfort in J. D. Salinger’s book “Catcher in the Rye”. Steve ultimately enlists in the Army against the wishes of his parents. Natalie continues to hear the voice of Ruby in her head, urging her to pursue a career in dance. Natalie loses weight, which worries Miri.

Gaby Wenders, in her early twenties, is a stewardess for National Airlines. She is on board the third plane to crash in Elizabeth, and is among the thirty-eight survivors (two of whom later die). She is rescued by Mason. Natalie’s health continues to deteriorate. Miri and Natalie grow apart as Natalie focuses on dance, insisting it is Ruby’s doing, and as Miri spends more time with Mason. Natalie’s parents disagree on putting her into a rest home, and their marriage falls apart. Natalie’s father ends up seeing and marrying Rusty. Natalie, after a rest home stay, recovers to some degree, though her friendship with Miri does not. Natalie’s father moves his entire dental practice to Las Vegas, where Rusty and Miri move. Miri breaks up with Mason when she learns Mason has been cheating on her.

Thirty-five years later, most of the people alive during the time of the 51-52 crashes return for a memorial ceremony. Gaby dedicates a plaque to Elizabeth for the city’s resilience and heroism in the face of disaster. Miri is now married with children, as is



Mason – but they are glad to see each other and let go of the past. Christina has married Jack, while Steve died fighting in Korea decades before. Rusty is caring for Natalie's dying father, and Natalie and her father finally make up and apologize to one another. Miri ultimately decides to write a book about the airline crashes.



Thirty-five Years Later, February 10, 1987 – Part 1, December 1951, Chapter 6

Summary

Thirty-five Years Later, February 10, 1987 – An unidentified woman is at the airport in Newark. She feels conflicted about leaving or staying. She gets on the plane, and pulls out a leather-covered journal which was a gift from Christina. There is one entry in the journal, which speaks of the past staying with one, life moving on, and how she and others will always be connected by “that winter”. The woman will be required to share some thoughts with unidentified others the following day.

Part I, Chapter 1 – It is December, 1951 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Miri Ammerman and her best friend, Natalie Osner, await the first-ever televised tree-lighting in Rockefeller Center. Miri and her second best friend, Suzanna Dietz, go to Nia’s Lingerie on Broad Street so Miri can buy her mother Naomi, known as Rusty, a half-slip. Nia’s daughter, Athena, helps Miri shop. Miri decides on a navy blue half-slip because her mother is in business in New York.

Bad weather is coming. At home, Rusty tends to chores and then takes a bath. Rusty and Miri live in a two-family house with Rusty’s mother, Irene, and her brother, Henry. The family is Jewish and very close. Henry, a veteran, works at the Elizabeth Daily Post, a newspaper. Irene sells metal goods from home, ranging from compacts to lighters. Rusty helps out with her mother’s open house. Estelle Sapphire from Bayonne calls, reserving six compacts since she is traveling to Florida. Rusty wraps some compacts for Mrs. Delaney. Delaney’s son, a married Catholic with four children, works at the bank. Sometimes he and Rusty flirt.

Near the Martin building and Steve Osner’s father’s dental office, Steve and Phil Stein, seniors at Thomas Jefferson High, play basketball. They will have to attend Steve’s sister’s birthday party as chaperones, but plan to play cards in the laundry room instead. They meet up with their friend Mason, his dog, Fred, and part ways. Phil brings Mason home for dinner, after which they head to Steve’s, leaving Fred behind at Phil’s house. Steve’s 15-year-old sister, Natalie, dislikes that her brother and his friends are going to chaperone. Natalie’s mother insists it is necessary, and that Natalie and her friends won’t even know Steve and the guys are there. Natalie tells Steve to stay away from her friends.

In Queens, Ruby Granik prepares to leave for Miami the next day. She is a professional dancer who has just appeared at Café Society in New York, and will be performing at the Vagabond Club in Miami next. She feels guilty about leaving her family for the holidays, but knows she must to support her parents. Her father has an amputated foot from diabetes, and her mother cares for him full-time. Their sole source of income is Ruby. Her Aunt Emmy will be visiting from Elizabeth, New Jersey, which will cause her



normally argumentative parents to calm down. Ruby's best friend and fellow dancer, Dana, visits. They go for drinks at Billy's.

Miri and Suzanne go to Natalie's party. Natalie's family celebrates a Jewish version of Christmas, in which Christian customs are observed, such as decorating a tree. The Osners' basement is the most popular place for kids to hang out, since it has a jukebox. Mason, unknown to Miri, dances with her. She is instantly attracted to him. As the songs end, he disappears in the crowd. Going upstairs, Miri sees Natalie's little sister, Fern, and tucks her into bed. Miri asks Natalie about the boy. Natalie says it was probably one of Steve's friends. Steve, meanwhile, is angry with Mason for dancing with Miri. Mason leaves. Doctor Osner then drives Miri to Roberta's house. Roberta is called "Robo". Miri thinks about how her own father left her pregnant mother when she was seventeen.

Part I, Chapter 2 – It is December 15. Miri feels as if she is not pretty enough. She gives her mother the Hanukah gift of the slip. Rusty loves it. They decide to go see a double-feature at the Elmore, including the movies "You Never Can Tell" and "Across the Wide Missouri". Ruby has an ice cream soda at Hanson's Drug Store, prepared by the soda jerk, Jimmy. Her plane is two hours late, but it is the price to pay for cheap flights on unscheduled planes. Ruby once shared a kiss with Danny, but it never became more. Ruby has been dating Paul, brother of Danny Thomas, hoping not only for romance but for a chance in the movies. At the airport, Ruby overhears Estelle Sapphire reminding her husband to pick up the reserved compacts. She then rejects a polite advance from a veteran named Paul Stefanelli.

Leah Cohen hopes that Henry will propose marriage to her sooner rather than later. She is almost 25, and longs to be married. She works as a teacher and lives with her Aunt Alma, an old maid. Leah and her fellow teacher and friend, Harriet Makenna, go to chaperone a children's party at the Elks Club, to be covered by Henry and a photographer named Todd Dirkson. By three that afternoon, Ruby has boarded her plane. It takes off, but doesn't climb. It crashes instead. Henry and Todd see the crash, and rush to the scene. Miri and her mother are nearly hit by the crash in the nearby river, knocked off their feet by the impact.

Henry arrives at the Elizabeth River, where the plane is on its back, its stomach ripped open. Emergency services are everywhere, going through debris and bodies. Rusty, Irene, Leah, and Miri have dinner together. Natalie and her mother, Corinne, stop by to see that everyone is okay. As Rusty heads into work the next day, she reflects on Miri wondering how God could let such a bad thing happen. Rusty works as secretary to Charles Whitten, senior partner at Whitten, Granger, and White, an esteemed law firm in New York. Irene, meanwhile, bakes bread for everyone involved in handling the crash.

At school, Miri's classmates discuss the crash. Some think it was a comet, others a bomb, others a Communist plot. Eleanor Gordon thinks it had nothing to do with the Communists. Mrs. Wallace, Miri's homeroom teacher, asks Miri to choose a Psalm for their morning prayer after learning from Suzanne that Miri saw the crash. Miri later learns that Natalie has been getting a buzzing sound in her head, and when it stops, Ruby begins speaking to her. It is later learned that Paul Stefanelli and Estelle Sapphie



are among the dead. Estelle's husband Ben, heartbroken, wants to pay for her order, but Irene refuses this offer.

Part 1, Chapter 3- The December 17 issue of the Elizabeth Daily Post carries details of the crash, written by Henry. The plane's right wing collapsed, took off a section of an unoccupied house, smashed into a warehouse from the Elizabethtown Water Company, and landed on its back on the frozen river. All 56 on board, including four crew, are dead. It causes Miri to wonder about her father, Mike Monsky. What little she knows about him comes from Henry.

Part 1, Chapter 4 – The December 18 issue of the Elizabeth Daily Post carries information that the C-46 airliner had been under repairs just before the flight, and then upon takeoff, smoke was seen coming from the right engine. The plane was turning back to land when it crashed. Joseph O. Fluet is in charge of the investigation for the Civil Aeronautics Board.

Many in the town wonder whether the school would be right to hold its Christmas pageant, but the principal insists the show must go on. Though Miri is Jewish, she enjoys partaking in Christmas activities. Irene does not like this at all. During one performance of the pageant, Natalie, playing Mother Mary, begins crying, saying she hates babies. Miri goes to see Natalie afterwards, only to be told by Mrs. Barnes, the maid, that Natalie is sleeping. Mrs. Barnes, whose son is a pilot, says that the captain of the doomed plane brought it down on the river to avoid hitting residential areas, saving lots of lives. Miri goes to see Natalie, who is humiliated. Natalie says that it is Ruby who is actually crying, and who is telling Natalie about the babies in the plane. Natalie brings Miri to dance class. Natalie does incredibly well, and says it is because Ruby is living inside her. Miri does not know how to take this.

Part 1, Chapter 5 – The paper carries a story on Ruby's death. 18-year-old Christina Demetrious is struck by the article knowing that life is short. Christina works for Dr. Osner. She goes on an annual trip to New York with his office workers. On the way, she knits Argyle socks for her boyfriend Jack, older brother of Mason. Christina's friend and fellow coworker, Daisy, understands that Christina is uncomfortable around the Osners because they have so little in common. Daisy gives Christina the book "Love Without Fear" for Christmas, which answers questions Daisy herself was afraid to ask when she was younger. She is also given a key to the office –a symbol of trust.

Part 1, Chapter 6 – The paper reports that among those things pulled from the wreck are Christmas gifts never to be given. Within a week, things begin to return to normal. Miri attends a holiday dance, wearing a pair of her mother's shoes. There, Mason McKittrick formally introduces himself. They dance only with each other. Mason kisses her. Miri calls her mom to let her know she is being walked home by a nice boy. As they walk, Miri explains she saw the crash. Mason says he was at work when they felt it.

Miri gives him her number. He kisses her goodnight. She is already in love with him. Miri sees Mason several times over Christmas vacation. Irene cautions Miri to be careful.



Rusty worries, but isn't as concerned as Irene. Miri learns from Christina that Mason lives at Janet Memorial Orphanage. She encourages Miri to watch Mason's dog for him.

Analysis

"In the Unlikely Event" is a historical novel by Judy Blume which recounts three airline crashes in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in the winter of 1951-52, and the effect they had on the people living in the town. As the novel begins, Elizabeth is much like any town anywhere in the United States. People go about their daily lives doing everything from going to work and school to being with family. Family itself becomes a major theme in the novel quickly, demonstrated by Miri's purchase of Hanukah gifts for her mother, Rusty. It is clear that Miri and Rusty are quite close, as are Miri and her grandmother, Irene. It is during a mother-daughter movie date that Miri and Rusty see the first plane crash.

The reader should also note that the Ammerman family – in three generations – lives together in a double-family home. There is Irene, mother of Rusty and Henry, and grandmother of Miri; Henry, the uncle of Miri, son of Irene, and brother of Rusty; and Rusty, mother of Miri, sister of Henry, and daughter of Irene. Their closeness as a family is reflected in the amount of time they spend together between dinners and simply enjoying one another's company.

The theme of family can also be glimpsed among other residents. For example, the Osners hold a birthday party for Natalie, at which Steve is required to chaperone. While he is reluctant to chaperone, and while Natalie is reluctant to have Steve chaperone, it is clear that they love one another. Natalie realizes that Steve is merely fulfilling the role of a protective older brother, but warns him to stay away from her friends.

But the airline crash shatters the serene environment of Elizabeth, and brings to fore the theme of tragedy. The people of Elizabeth have never before had to deal with a tragedy of this magnitude, and it shows in the way that many of them react to the crash. Christina Demetrious, for example, realizes how short life can be, and how unexpectedly it can be cut. The reader should note that Christina is poised to take her life into her own hands, and the gift of the book "Love Without Fear" will help propel Christina to take romantic risks in future chapters.

The tragedy has other effects. Henry begins writing stories on the airline crash. The stories generate much interest not only for the crash itself, but for the skill in Henry's journalism. Natalie appears to be most affected of anyone by the tragedy. She admits to Miri that she is hearing Ruby's voice in her head. She can also hear the sound of babies crying. The reaction that Natalie has to the tragedy is startling, even scary, but not unusual given the terror of the incident. Extreme reactions to extreme events are not uncommon, and Natalie is certainly suffering an extreme reaction. Miri herself begins to wonder about her own past, and about her father whom she has never known.



It is through Miri and Natalie that the theme of friendship can also be seen. Miri's desire to keep Natalie's hearing of Ruby's voice a secret is demonstrative of the friendship between Miri and Natalie, but their friendship is seen in other ways as well. When the novel begins, Miri and Natalie are watching the Christmas tree lighting in Rockefeller Plaza in New York on TV. Miri is among those invited to Natalie's birthday party. Miri's time at Natalie's house for the birthday party demonstrates the extent of their friendship and how much Miri is around the Osner household when Fern – very comfortable with Miri – is tucked back into bed by Miri.

Despite the tragedy, life goes on in Elizabeth soon after. People are shaken, but normalcy largely returns. This can be seen through the emergence of the theme of romance, subtle at first, but stronger later in the novel. Mason's impromptu dance with Miri at Natalie's birthday party leads to Miri being smitten with Mason. At a holiday dance a week later, Mason and Miri dance once more. They kiss, and Mason walks Miri home. It is readily apparent the two like one another, and the possibility of romance between them is real.

The theme of coming of age also emerges in this section of the novel through Miri. When the novel begins, Miri is like any average 14-year-old girl; she worries about being pretty, about friends, and about getting a boy to like her. Her life has been relatively comfortable despite having never met her father. Yet the plane crash jars Miri out of her everyday life. She experiences real tragedy firsthand for the first time in her life. It awakens a sense of mortality in her, which helps her to fall for Mason. Falling for Mason is also a first for Miri in terms of romance. Miri's love for Mason, and the two airline crashes yet to come, will have tremendous consequences on Miri's development as she comes of age.

Discussion Question 1

Select three characters presented in the novel so far. Describe their lives before and after the first plane crash. For each character, explain why their lives have or have not changed as a result of the crash.

Discussion Question 2

Miri and Natalie react differently to the crash. How do they respond to the tragedy? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the first airline crash so shocking to the community of Elizabeth? How does the community as a whole respond? Why?

Vocabulary

mythology, lobbied, rambunctious, pronounced, balked, dissuade, superstitious, sophisticated, seclusion, admonition



Part I, Chapter 7 – Part II, Chapter 15

Summary

Part I, Chapter 7 – A news article written by Henry in the Elizabeth Daily Post reveals that C-46 planes, converted to civilian use from military use, were never very reliable planes, prone to accidents. Servicemen nicknamed them “Flying Coffins”. Miami Airlines, responsible for the crashed plane, is now under investigation for running too many flights. Miri reflects unhappily about how she is the only one of her friends without a father. Ben Sapphire, meanwhile, misses his wife terribly. He only knows he needs to get out his house. Too much reminds him of Estelle, and it pains him that he cheated on her when she loved him so dearly.

Part 1, Chapter 8 – Miri goes to Natalie’s for New Year’s Eve, while Henry goes to pick up Leah. He intends to propose with a beautiful ring, a family heirloom. Rusty usually stays at home for New Year’s Eve, the date of her own father’s death. However, Rusty comes out this year to meet Natalie’s mother’s first cousin Tewky Purvis from Birmingham. She and Tewky hit it off. Rusty has always kept her romantic life apart from her family to protect them from getting their hopes up. Yet at the party, her romantic side can now clearly be seen. At the party, Natalie continues to insist that Ruby is living inside her. She has promised Ruby that she will become a dancer and never get married. Miri begins to suspect that maybe Natalie is really telling the truth. She also wonders about her mother and Tewky.

Part II, Chapter 9 – It is now January 1952. The investigation into the crash is well underway. Fluet rejects a story that a stewardess told her sister the plain was unfit to fly as conjecture. At Syracuse University, Kathy Stein tells her roommate Jane Krasner that she has met a nice boy over break named Steve. He is a few months younger than she is, and is a senior in high school. Kathy wants to fly home after finals so she can see Steve.

Part II, Chapter 10 – Toward the middle of January, everything has relatively returned to normal. The paper carries a story about Posture Queen. Mason calls Miri every night when he is on break at work. Every other Sunday night, Miri and Suzanne babysit for the Fosters’s children, Penny and Betsy. Suzanne thinks the Fosters go to a motel instead of to a movie as they say. This makes Miri wonder about her own mother’s supposed dates. As time passes, Miri helps to continue to take care of Mason’s dog, Fred. At Phil’s house, Miri learns about Kathy Stein, a freshman at Syracuse who was at the New Year’s party. Learning that Miri will be 15 on January 15, Mrs. Stein gives her a beautiful gold and garnet bracelet.

At home, Rusty disapproves of this. Miri reluctantly returns it. On her birthday, Miri learns that her mother had previously purchased a gold and garnet bracelet for her. Miriam both apologizes and is thrilled. Mason gives Miri a beautiful kaleidoscope for her birthday. The kaleidoscope originally belonged to Mason’s mother. Rusty regards Miri’s



relationship as sweet, but thinks it won't last. Miri, Eleanor, Natalie, Roberta, and Suzanne watch "Your Hit Parade" on TV that evening. They then give Miri a beautiful cashmere aqua sweater they have all pitched in for. Roberta then announces her family will be moving to Millburn in February due to the crash.

Part II, Chapter 11 – The Korean War is heating up. Congress is looking to make budget cuts in an election year. Steve Osner and his father fly to Boston to visit colleges. Heavy snow cancels their flight home, so Steve's dad books an unscheduled flight, but not on a C-46.

Part II, Chapter 12 – Frekki Strasser is acquainted with the Osners, and hears about Miri through Sherry Strasser, wife of her husband's cousin. Sherry works at a shoe store visited by Miri. Sherry says that Miri has eyes like Frekki's brother, Mike. Sherry reveals that rumors circulate about Mike leaving town in a hurry, and Rusty marrying a boy who got her pregnant. Frekki counters that her brother enlisted as opposed to leaving, and that Rusty never married anyone to her knowledge. Frekki calls her brother that night to find out if he is indeed Miri's father. He denies it. Frekki then decides to meet Miri herself.

Miri's family is planning to celebrate Henry's engagement to Leah at The Tavern. Mason is not allowed to come. Before they leave, a woman named Frekki Strasser arrives, explaining her maiden name is Monsky. Rusty is stunned and orders Miri upstairs. She has no idea why Frekki would want to get to know her niece 15 years after the fact. Frekki is ordered out, but gives Rusty an envelope with an invitation to lunch and a show at the Paper Mill Playhouse for Miri. Frekki explains she is living in South Orange, and is married to a doctor. After she leaves, neither Rusty nor Irene say anything about it.

Part II, Chapter 13 – Phil's father, Dr. Ronald T. Stein, is named chairman of the Union County division for the Annual March of Dimes Polio Drive. Dining at The Tavern to celebrate Leah and Henry, Rusty reveals that she and Tewky will see each other again, even though he doesn't want to be married. They run into the Osners, who are happy to meet Leah and her Aunt Alma. Osner introduces everyone to Sam Teiger, owner of The Tavern. The Osners and Miri's family decide to celebrate together. Also dining nearby are the Steins. Leah is embarrassed her parents aren't present. Her father is a cheapskate with money, time, and affection, but she blames his absence on his arthritis. Leah also worries that she has a lot to live up to since Henry values his family so highly. After dinner, Mr. Osner introduces Henry and his family to Abe "Longy" Zwillman, who thinks Henry should write for the Newark News. Abe is smitten with Rusty.

Part II, Chapter 14 – The newspaper carries word of President Truman wintering in Key West, Florida. On January 22, Kathy finishes her final exam in English. The weather is bad, and her flight – Airlines Flight 6780 – is late. Three other Syracuse students are on the same flight. On board, Kathy happily talks to former Secretary of War under President Truman, Robert Patterson. The ride is bumpy, but Patterson tells her not to worry.



Steven and Phil cut American History to meet Kathy at the airport. Phil's mother tells them she will pick up Kathy instead so they don't have to drive in bad weather. Laura Barnes dislikes bad weather. She worries for her husband, Tim, a pilot, on a routine flight on a Convair 240. Tim's mother, Mrs. Barnes, always watches for Tim's plane overhead. Natalie and Miri, meanwhile, find themselves growing distant as Natalie takes dance classes three days a week in New York, and Miri dates Mason. Christina, meanwhile, helps Mr. Durkee with his bookkeeping class at Battin High School. They are terrified to see a plane barely miss their building, and crash into some nearby buildings.

Miri hears the news on the radio of the crash of the American Airlines Convair. Mrs. Barnes cries in heartbreak. Laura is devastated. Miri finds Natalie in the basement a short time later, rocking back and forth in the corner, saying that "they" are out to get them, and that it is only a matter of time. Natalie also says that Ruby told her Kathy was on the doomed plane. Steve and Phil are stunned. Steve cries. Christina is worried at first that Jack's building has been hit, but is thankful to learn this is not the case. However, she cannot find Jack. Christina's sister, Athena, calls to complain about Christina not calling their mother, who is sick with worry. Enraged, Christina tells Athena she witnessed the crash, and hangs up. Dr. Osner confirms the pilot of the wreck was Laura's husband, Mrs. Barnes's son.

As Steve gets home, Miri asks him if Phil's cousin was on the plane. Steve confirms this, asking how she knew. Miri says Natalie told her. Steve can't understand how Miri knows. Meeting up with Suzanne, Miri learns that one of the houses burned by fire from the crash was the Fosters'. Only Betsy and Mrs. Foster have survived. At home, Irene contends that bad things happen in threes. Rusty tells Irene that her superstitions are scaring Miri. Miri insists this is not true, though she is lying. She and Suzanne go to visit the scene of the crash. Mason is also there. He explains that his friend, Polina, and her young son, sometimes watched Fred. Polina's house has been among those lost. At home, Henry believes it has been a tragic accident, but Rusty thinks two crashes in a row isn't an accident.

Part II, Chapter 15 – A special edition of the Elizabeth Daily Post carries news of the new crash, including the destruction of an entire block of Elizabeth. Six citizens are missing and feared dead, along with all 23 passengers on board the plane. Rumors swirl among Miri's classmates, some of whom blame UFOs. Eleanor comes to believe it is sabotage. The school goes through safety drills. Miri and her family later pay a condolence visit to Mrs. Barnes along with other members of the community. Miri and her mother later attend the funeral of Mr. and Mrs. Galanos. Their son has survived. Christina reflects out loud on how her mother was hoping she would marry the son. Athena says she thought Christina was into Jack McKittrick, and tells her she is skating on thin ice.

Steve attends Shiva at Kathy Stein's house. Her family is devastated. Steve is still reeling, often sick to his stomach. He stays in bed for four days. He takes comfort in Holden Caulfield's character in *Catcher in the Rye*. Secretary Patterson's widow does not blame Tim for the crash, but the weather. She considers invited Tim's family to come



spend a day at her farm upstate. Tim's wife miscarries their third child. The news reports that the plane became lost in the fog upon descent. The Elizabeth Daily Post, in an editorial, calls for the governor to expand Newark Airport. More than a thousand people turn out for a public meeting in which a demand is made to close down the airport. Miri, Mason, Rusty, Irene, and others attend. Miri and Mason sign a petition to shut down the airport.

Analysis

Family continues to be an important theme in this section of the novel. The initial plane crash causes Miri and her family to draw closer, taking comfort in the safety and stability of family. This causes Miri to reflect unhappily about how she is the only one of her friends without a father. The reader should note that Miri's dawning understanding of not having a father is also in conjunction with the theme of coming of age. Miri's desire for a father in her life provides a position from which she will either dissent or accept by the end of the novel. In many ways, Miri reflects her own mother's sadness. Rusty usually stays home on New Year's, because that is when her own father died years before.

The non-presence of Miri's father is suddenly disrupted by Mike's sister, Frekki, who suddenly appears at the house one day. Frekki insists she wants to get to know Miri. Rusty is doubtful, but Miri is cautious but hopeful that her Aunt Frekki will prove to be a window into more family, and into knowledge of the past. Rusty is doubtful; Irene is beyond opposed to Frekki's presence. Neither Rusty nor Irene speak of Frekki again for some time. It is a familial connection they want no part of.

Despite the tragedy of the first airline crash, things seem to be more or less completely normal again, except for Natalie. Natalie continues to insist that she hears Ruby's voice in her head, and that Ruby is instructing her to become a dancer, and warning her to never get married. Miri is unnerved by this, but even more so by the revelation that Phil's cousin Kathy is among those dead on the second crash – something which Miri cannot understand how Natalie knew. Miri, chilled, begins to wonder if the spirit of the dead Ruby truly is living inside Natalie, and what implications this may ultimately have.

In owing to normality, romance continues to blossom in this section of the novel. Steve and Kathy have begun dating. Their connection is strong and deep, perhaps even so to the point of love. This is exemplified in the violent sickness that Steve experiences as a result of Kathy's death. Steve's reaction to the ensuing tragedy that disrupts the normality of romance is natural. He takes comfort where he can, especially in J. D. Salinger's novel "Catcher in the Rye". Just as the character of Holden Caulfield has a difficult time making sense of what is real and phony in the world, Steve himself feels as if he has trouble discerning reality with the loss of Kathy.

Kathy's death on board the second airline to crash into Elizabeth returns the theme of tragedy prominently to the fore. The first crash, which killed all the plane's passengers but spared locals by the disaster occurring at the river, is not repeated with the second. The second crash destroys an entire block of the city, leading to several local deaths,



numerous injuries, the loss of many homes, and the destruction of much property. The town of Elizabeth is rocked by a second tragedy of the same nature. Accordingly, people respond differently.

The community at large responds by holding a public meeting demanding that Newark Airport be shut down until safety precautions can be taken and safeguards emplaced. Miri, and many other young people, are among those who sign the petition calling for the airport's closure. Natalie's reaction to the first crash is intensified with the second. Natalie's hearing of Ruby's voice moves into something resembling psychotic paranoia, in which she says that "they" will come for them sooner or later, that everyone is doomed.

The community of Elizabeth rallies together around those who have lost loved ones, and around those whose homes have been destroyed. In the face of tragedy, people pull together. The residents of Elizabeth – especially those at school – begin to seriously doubt that two airplane crashes within a few weeks of one another can be accidental. People are scrambling for answers. Miri herself has previously wondered how God could let such a tragedy occur; others are blaming Communists and aliens.

Despite the tragedy, some semblance of normality is again glimpsed through the themes of friendship and romance. Miri's friends – including Natalie – gather together to celebrate Miri's fifteenth birthday. The reader should note the importance of living on, as Miri has grown another year older, while the dead from the crashes will no longer have birthdays. Miri cannot take life for granted, and so much remember to live. Henry and Leah remember to live through their romance. They become engaged. Miri and Mason continue to see one another, their romance growing. Here, Miri continues to come of age, as she must learn to deal with tragedy and embrace romance.

Discussion Question 1

When the second airline crash occurs in Elizabeth, many believe that two such crashes cannot be an accident. Why? What causes are attributed to the crashes? Why is this so?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the community of Elizabeth rally following the second airline crash? Is the community response to the first crash greater or lesser than the first? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Despite the tragedy of the dual crashes, many residents struggle to get on with their lives as normal. Miri and Henry are two such people. How do they attempt to get on normally? Are they successful? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

samba, rhumba, conjecture, prospective, meshuggeneh, delicate, exquisite, intricate, serenaded, daintily, meticulously, davening, sabotage

Part II, Chapter 16 – Part III, Chapter 23

Summary

Part II, Chapter 16 – Daisy invites Polina and her toddler, Stash, to stay with her and her sister since Polina's house is now gone. At first, Daisy's sister Evelyn is unhappy about the idea, but soon warms up to Stash and Polina. Miri and countless others donate clothing, food, books, and other items to those impacted by the crash.

Part II, Chapter 17 – Irene opposes Miri's desire to go to the Paper Mill Playhouse with Frekki Strasser. Irene and Ben Sapphire have been seeing one another. Ben wants to bring Irene to Miami. She has become immensely important to him since the death of his wife. Rusty worries her mother's heart may end up broken. Meanwhile, Longy notes that Dr. Osner appears tired. Daisy worries that it is Osner's heart. Osner has lost two brothers to heart attacks. Daisy makes sure Osner's schedule is clear over the weekend to allow Osner to go to Las Vegas with Longy.

Henry and Leah plan their wedding for June. Miri wonders how this is possible after two airline crashes, but imagines that life must go on as Irene says it must. Rusty agrees to let Miri go to the Playhouse to see "The Desert Song" with Frekki. Miri gets her hair cut like Elizabeth Taylor, but knows her mother will be angry about the short cut. Frekki picks Miri up in a yellow Cadillac. Frekki is warm and friendly. At a restaurant after the show, Miri is stunned to meet Mike – her father. She realizes the entire evening has been a trick. She is angry and shocked. Mike explains he lives in Los Altos, California. He has a wife, Adela, and sons, Jeffrey and Josh. Mike hopes to get to know Miri. Mike drops Miri off two blocks from her house as she requests. Mike explains he has changed his last name to Monk, but that Frekki doesn't know yet. Miri is still angry and emotionally confused.

Part II, Chapter 18 – Christina and Jack go on a double-date with Miri and Mason to see the movie "The Thing". Afterwards, Miri and Mason sneak down into Miri's basement. They play Trust, where they reveal secrets to one another. Mason reveals his father was physically abusive, so his mother left him. She was later found dead on the railroad tracks, the cause unknown but murder suspected. Jack then took Mason to Janet to live. Miri cries.

Part III, Chapter 19 – February 1952 comes on. Christina helps her mother, Nia, and sister, Athena, ready the lingerie store for Valentine's Day. Mrs. Osner comes in to shop, and is happy to learn about Athena's pregnancy. Mrs. Osner then sets aside something special in case Dr. Osner should come to the store. Christina drops a hint to Daisy who drops a hint to Dr. Osner.

Part III, Chapter 20 – On February 6, King George VI of England dies. Princess Elizabeth, twenty-five years of age, will become Queen. Miri and Suzanne buy a big stuffed panda for Betsy Foster. Miri receives a letter from Mike, stating his family now



knows about her, and they all hope she'll visit them over the summer. Miri goes shoe shopping with her mother. Rusty buys a pair for Miri. Miri notices her mother seems unusually happy. Rusty also meets with Polina to see if a friend can get Polina an apartment. Miri goes for an appointment with Dr. Osner. He finds that she is grinding her teeth in nervousness. She will need a device to wear at night to prevent grinding.

While bowling with friends, Mason kisses Miri in public for the first time. Natalie's family refinishes their house's basement to include a hardwood tap dance floor. Miri is surprised to learn that Natalie has lost so much weight. Natalie explains that Ruby has been coaching her to eat grapes and drink lots of water to stay hydrated. Miri is worried, telling Natalie to tell her parents about Ruby. Natalie insists she doesn't need help. She begins dancing, turning purple in the face. Miri rushes upstairs to tell Dr. and Mrs. Osner, who rush down to bring Natalie to the hospital.

Part III, Chapter 21 – Gaby Wenders has had a lifelong dream of wanting to fly. She is now a stewardess for National Airlines. She lets nothing, not even boys, get in the way of her goals. She occasionally dates Longy Zwillman, a regular flyer, but doesn't get serious with him. In air, Gaby calms down Mrs. Iverson, a regular who is not always comfortable flying. Suddenly, the plane begins losing altitude. Christina and Jack go to the roller rink, then have sex for the first time at Jack's place. Natalie, meanwhile, is checked into Elizabeth General Hospital. Her nurse, Mrs. K., is the mother of Phyllis Kirk. Natalie reveals she doesn't like to eat because she always throws up.

Driving Christina home, Jack and Christina see an airplane pass low overhead. Phil is walking Fred when he sees an explosion. It wakes Miri up. To calm herself, she holds onto the kaleidoscope. Mason thinks about Miri, and about Polina. He then hears the sound of the crash. The boys rush out of their dormitory at the orphanage. They rush along to help first responders pull out passengers who are dead and who have survived. Christina and her family rush to help the Red Cross. Miri is amazed the next morning to learn of Mason's heroism.

Part III, Chapter 22 – The Port Authority shuts down Newark Airport. Twenty-two passengers and four occupants of the destroyed apartment building where the plane crashes have died. Rumors abound at school about aliens and the mob being involved with the crashes. Eleanor continues to believe it is sabotage, and believes Henry will get to the bottom of it with his reporting. When Miri calls to talk to Natalie, Steve explains that Natalie is not at home, and that he is not telling the truth.

Part III, Chapter 23 – The paper carries the story of a tall man whose tall bride has gone missing. Miri wonders why a bride-to-be would leave her husband-to-be. Miri gets Irene to allow Mason to come to Valentine's Day dinner, but Irene is very worried about romance between them. Miss Naomi Rheingold joins them for dinner. Miss Rheingold's fiancée has been killed in combat. Leah, Henry, and Ben Sapphire join dinner as well. Mason arrives, bringing Miri a red rose. At dinner, Irene is glad to learn that Mason enjoys her cooking so much. It is revealed that Henry may be leaving his job for a new reporting job at a bigger and better paper. Steve drinks to a picture of Kathy, gets sick, and passes out.



Analysis

As the novel moves on, the community of Elizabeth continues to tend to those affected by the tragedy of the second crash. Christina, for example, opens up her home to Polina and Polina's little boy, Stash. Miri, in addition to numerous other citizens of Elizabeth, take up collections of food, clothing, books, toiletries, and other important items for locals who have lost their homes, and in many cases, everything they have. It is an amazing response to the second tragedy.

Others continue to respond in different ways to the two crashes. Irene becomes romantically close with Ben Sapphire, who invites Irene to accompany him to Miami. Osner, who has been working longer hours and dealing with the strain of his family between Steve and Natalie, grows weary and is taken on vacation to Las Vegas. The reader should note that this visit to Las Vegas will prove to be a vital trip for Osner, for it will ultimately come to help propel his life in an entirely new direction.

Miri is nervous in her sleep, grinding her teeth, and will need to wear a retainer at night to prevent greater damage. Miri also wonders how anyone can live normally after two crashes, but comes to accept Irene's simple but poignant explanation that life must go on. It is a lesson that Miri learns as she continues to come of age. She sees how Henry and Leah move ahead with their engagement, planning their actual wedding for June. Leah will be a welcome addition to the family.

Family also becomes a prominent theme once more in the novel as Miri heads out with Frekki to the Playhouse, only to learn that the entire evening is a ruse for a meeting with her father, Mike. Miri is not thrilled about the circumstances that have made the meeting possible, but realizes that her father is nevertheless suddenly in her life. She is not entirely happy or angry to see him, but is rather emotionally confused. It is not the sort of family reunion she'd been considering, especially because the reunion with her father has been under dubious circumstances.

Despite the drawbacks of Frekki's hastily-arranged family night, Miri's life returns to some semblance of normality as she continues to date Mason. Not only does their relationship become more public by way of a double-date and a kiss in front of Miri's friends, but also becomes more introspective by way of personal connection. Mason entrusts Miri with the secret that his father was emotionally and physically abusive towards both Mason and Mason's mother. It is the kind of revelation that moves Miri to a place of actual love, rather than just romance.

As Miri and Mason grow closer, Miri and Natalie grow apart. The theme of friendship returns in a negative fashion as Miri and Natalie become bitter with one another. Natalie insists Miri is spending too much time with Mason; Miri insists that Natalie is focused too much on dance. Despite their differences, Miri continues to value Natalie as a friend. Natalie's purple-faced dancing episode cause Miri to respond in horror and worry for Natalie's health. This leads to Natalie being taken to Elizabeth General Hospital, where the reader is able to conclude that Natalie suffers from anorexia.



Tragedy becomes a prominent theme once more in this section of the novel, as a third airliner ultimately goes down. Miraculously, people survive the crash, marking it a distinct from the previous two. Mason is among those who helps to rescue survivors. The reader should note with the third and final crash the symbolic importance of the plane going down.

Three characters – Ruby, Kathy, and Gaby – have been presented as having dreams which they are pursuing. In so doing, they become symbolic of every person in the world. The air flight can be seen as the actual pursuit of those dreams. The crash of the plane is symbolic of failed or unrealized dreams – much the way that life in general complicates plans and dreams, often causing them never to work out. How people respond to such situations is important. Likewise, the crash of the plane that interrupts Mason's thoughts about Miri and Polina can be seen as a bad omen for himself.

Discussion Question 1

What is Miri's first encounter with her father like? What is Miri's reaction to meeting her father for the first time? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Miri and Natalie begin to grow apart? On what do they blame their growing apart? Why is Miri particularly concerned not only about the strain on their friendship, but for Natalie herself?

Discussion Question 3

What is so different about the third crash as opposed to the previous two in terms of passengers? How do the residents of Elizabeth respond to the third crash in comparison with the previous two? Why?

Vocabulary

goyish, remedy, anxiety, dervish, dissuade, imbeciles, awry



Part III, Chapter 24 – Part IV, Chapter 32

Summary

Part III, Chapter 24 – The paper reveals that 38 passengers survived the crash, including Gabrielle “Gaby” Wenders, but two of the survivors have since died. Natalie is brought to see a psychoanalyst named Dr. Boltzmann in New York. By then, she is pulling out her own hair without realizing it. Boltzmann suggests a rest home in Westchester County, New Jersey – the Watchung Hills Children’s Home. Osner and his wife consider moving, with Osner in favor and Corinne opposed. Corinne wonders if Osner is having an affair with Daisy; Osner says this is not true. He says they must save Natalie; Corinne says Natalie is merely sensitive, not unwell. Osner also wants to leave to avoid any more plane crashes.

Part III, Chapter 25 – Ruby Granik’s father begins litigation against Miami Airlines for the death of his daughter. Miri and Eleanor are worried about Natalie, having not heard from her in a week. Miri gives Eleanor and Tiny an article for the school paper about the crashes. But the teacher considers it provocative and does not want to publish it. Miri tells Henry about this. Henry approves of the story. The story is written from the perspective of the youth of Elizabeth, who are waiting for answers as to why so many tragedies have occurred. Henry helps Miri print up copies to hand out on her own. Eleanor helps hand them out.

The principal, Mr. Royer, meets with Henry. Royer orders Miri to leave the school paper for breaking the rules, threatening expulsion. Rusty, home from work, learns about what happened at the meeting with Royer and is livid. Henry urges her to let things go. Eleanor calls an emergency meeting of the school paper, the Hamilton Headlines. They agree to write unapproved stories, and strike if needed.

Part III, Chapter 26 – Christina’s period is late. Christina is worried sick. She will not have sex with Jack anymore, but allows sexual touching and masturbation. Jack and Christina decide to elope. They have sex that night. Christina gets her period a week later.

Part III, Chapter 27 – Irene goes to Miami for two weeks with Ben Sapphire. While out walking Fred with Miri, Mason comes across a drunk bum – his father. He shields Miri from his father, telling his father to get lost. In the mail, a letter comes for Rusty from Frekki. This worries Miri. The letter, as Rusty comes to angrily explain, reveals that Miri met Mike, that a meeting is being arranged with a Rabbi Beiderman, and that Rusty should feel free to consult a lawyer. Rusty tells Miri she cannot trust Mike or Frekki, ever. Rusty reveals this all to Henry. Henry’s friend Gregg Bender, a lawyer, meets with them. It is decided to have the meeting with the Rabbi.

At the meeting, Mike explains he wants to be a good father, and made a mistake leaving years before. The rabbi recommends Mike set up a fund for Miri for college, and Miri



herself is old enough to decide whether or not to visit with Mike. The rabbi urges Miri to give Mike a chance. Miri is unsure. Mike asks Miri for a hug; Miri says not yet. Leah has Henry and his family over to her Aunt Alma's for brunch. Meanwhile, Mike is unsure about how everything went with the Rabbi. Mike remembers ruining his relationship with Rusty in high school when he made a drunken pass at another girl. In the present, Mike knows he wouldn't be able to resist Rusty.

Part III, Chapter 28 – Christina keeps the wedding a secret. Christina begins seeing Dr. J. J. Strasser in Newark for gynecology due to her irregular periods. Strasser confirms it wasn't a miscarriage, and gives her a diaphragm to use during sex. Jack is invited over to Christina's parents' house. Her mother insists that Christina will marry a Greek boy someday. Christina begins using the diaphragm during sex, finding it difficult to use at first.

Part III, Chapter 29 – Miri writes to Natalie at Watchung Hills. She accompanies Corinne on a visit. The entire visit unnerves Miri. Natalie is not herself. She is not happy to be at Watchung Hills. A resident girl named Lulu constantly annoys Natalie. Natalie says that Ruby has left her without saying goodbye, and says her father wants them to move to Las Vegas. Natalie asks about Miri's relationship with Mason, asking why Miri can't admit she is in love with Mason. Miri knows it is a very deep love, but is afraid to say just how deep. She reflects on showing Mason her breasts the week before.

Part III, Chapter 30 – Steve is accepted into Syracuse University. He will not attend, haunted by the death of Kathy and the frailty of human life. Phil will not attend Syracuse, either. They both agree to go to Lehigh. Steve's family congratulates him with a cake which he decides to have some of for dinner.

Part III, Chapter 31 – Christina and Daisy know that Osner is struggling with the decision about whether or not to open up a practice in Las Vegas. Daisy tells Christina she should consider moving out to Vegas as well, that work for electricians like Jack is good. Christina, however, has no idea how to tell her parents she is married. Daisy herself ran off with a young man named Gerry Dupree, but the marriage was annulled since Daisy couldn't have children. Going to work for Osner, she comes to look at him like a father.

Part IV, Chapter 32 – The spring of 1952 comes on. On May 8, rumors spread of another plane crash. Authorities work quickly to silence the rumors, including at Miri's school. At home, Miri discovers her mother having sex with Dr. Osner, which shocks her and causes her to run out of the house. Later, Rusty explains that the Osners are divorcing, and that everything will be okay. Miri responds that nothing will ever be okay. Rusty says no one else knows about her and Dr. Osner. Rusty confesses she didn't know she was pregnant until after Mike left, but that she never would have married him anyways because it never would have worked out.

Natalie is now back at home. Miri goes to visit her. Natalie tells Miri that if she doesn't stop the pending marriage between Rusty and her father, or refuse to move to Las Vegas, she will never speak to Miri again. Natalie insists Miri force her mother to choose



between her and Osner. Natalie tells Miri that Corinne called Rusty a whore. Enraged and shocked, Miri leaves. She realizes that her mother and Osner are getting married. She also learns that Jack will be going with Christina to Las Vegas – and Mason will be going, too. It makes Miri very happy to know they will all be going. Polina arrives with Fred, and she hugs and kisses Mason which makes Miri unhappy. Polina insists she loves Mason like a son only. Miri realizes Polina is the woman Mason once kissed. Miri rushes off, telling Mason she never wants to see him again.

Christina, meanwhile, tells her whole family she will be moving to Las Vegas for two years to work with Osner. Her mother believes it is all for Jack. The argument causes Athena to go into labor. Christina later learns that Zak Galanos, whose parents were previously killed across the street from Battin, is applying for a job there. He asks Christina out, but she tells him she has a serious boyfriend.

Henry finds Miri outside their house, and brings her to Bradley Beach. He tells her that Arthur Osner and Rusty are the only ones who can answer the questions Miri has about them. Henry then brings her to meet them for dinner. Miri confesses to Henry about her break-up with Mason. Miri tells Rusty the same that night. Jack learns of the breakup from Christina, who heard it from Daisy, who was told by Polina. Jack is in disbelief. Mason decides not to go to Las Vegas. Miri is a little cheered by the fact that Irene and Ben will be moving to Las Vegas, too. Rusty later tells Miri she could never go to Las Vegas without her.

Analysis

Not only are there survivors from the third airline crash, but there are a large number of survivors who have managed to avoid death. The theme of tragedy is tempered by the survival of so many, but the living must now struggle to return to normalcy against the tragedy. Such is the case of Natalie, who is taken to a psychoanalyst and then to a rest home. Natalie has deteriorated to the point where she is pulling out her own hair without realizing it. Natalie's time at Watchung helps to cure her to the point of daily functioning, but her parents pay the price.

Natalie's illness serves as the point of no-return for her parents. Her father insists she needs continued treatment, while her mother insists that Natalie is merely sensitive. Arthur suggests moving to Las Vegas, the seed implanted in his mind from his previous visit; Corinne, however, does not want to leave her established life. The strain of the crashes, safety, and an uncertain future (especially regarding Natalie) weigh down heavily on the marriage, being the final straw that leads to divorce.

Family once more becomes important thematically, here. Miri, who has longed for a father, finds her desires fulfilled in unexpected and undesired ways. Her biological father and aunt press for a meeting with a rabbi at which a lawyer is present. The meeting determines that Mike will set aside a fund for his daughter, while Miri is encouraged to try to have a relationship with her father. It is an uncomfortable and disenchanting



experience for Miri. Having a father in her life is nothing like she thought that it would be.

Further disheartening to Miri (at least initially) is the knowledge that her mother is seeing Natalie's father. They intend to be married after Osner's divorce is finalized and everyone moves out to Las Vegas. Natalie demands that Miri stop the wedding or their friendship will end. Miri cannot and will not do this. Whereas Natalie's family is breaking up, Miri's family is being assembled. Natalie's father will become Miri's stepfather – a father figure she never expected to have. To Miri, it is almost as if Natalie is losing her father. She can't help but feel sorry for Natalie, and to understand how much Natalie has come to hate her own father.

The theme of romance also comes back to the fore through more trials for Miri. Miri discovers that there is something going on between Mason and Polina, causing Miri to break up with Mason. It is a heartbreaking decision for her to do. The theme of romance is also seen in Christina's elopement with Jack, and how at first she must unhappily keep the marriage a secret from her family. (For Christina, family is a negative rather than a positive thing.) Yet that Christina even elopes with Jack at all is proof of her desire to take her life into her own hands.

The theme of coming of age continues to be important for Miri and for Natalie in this section of the novel. Miri and Natalie have both had serious challenges thrown in their way, from the airline crashes to romance to family problems. Miri has stumbled but maintained herself through the trials, becoming a stronger, more mature young woman. She is able to handle tragedies, on small and large scales, and is able to learn from the experiences – especially when it comes to love and family.

She sees the way love can be a blessing and a curse, and the way family can be a good and bad thing. She preserves through the newspaper ordeal at school, becoming respected and admired for the stand that she makes. Natalie, on the other hand, is nearly broken by the challenges thrown in her way. Her world has been shattered, and she will never be the same again. Threatening the vitality of her friendship with Miri on condition of Miri's opposition to Rusty and Arthur getting married demonstrates that Natalie hasn't grown as a person at all.

Discussion Question 1

How does Miri react to her father's pursuit of a meeting with a rabbi? How does Miri react to the realization that Dr. Osner will become her stepfather? How do her reactions to these two situations compare?

Discussion Question 2

What proves to be the final straw in the Osners' marriage? Why can the Osners not see eye to eye on this particular issue?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Natalie give Miri the ultimatum of the loss of their friendship if Miri will not oppose the wedding between Arthur and Rusty? Do you believe her ultimatum is justifiable or understandable in any way? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

sarcasm, inflammatory, provocative, irregularity, anorexia, futility, impassioned, lucid, infuriate, discreet



Part IV, Chapter 33 – Thirty-five Years Later, February 10, 1987

Summary

Part IV, Chapter 33 – Leah and Henry are married in June. Mason begins to avoid Polina, wanting no more girlfriends. Jack makes Mason promise to write to him while Jack is away. Steven enlists in the Army after graduating from high school, having decided against college. His father is stunned, but his mother is enraged. For graduation from Daisy, Steve receives a gift of galley proofs from Kurt Vonnegut's first novel, and an issue of "The New Yorker" with the J.D. Salinger short story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish". It makes him cry, for someone truly does know him after all.

Part IV, Chapter 34 – Henry writes his last column for the Elizabeth Daily Post in which he recounts the three airline crashes. The December 16 Miami Airlines crash was due to poor maintenance and a damaged engine. The January 22 American Airlines Flight 6780 was probably due to bad weather and carburetor ice. The February 11 National Airlines Flight 101 suffered a sudden, unexpected reversal of propeller No. 3. Henry calls on better safety precautions for inhabited areas around Newark Airport before it is reopened.

Miri, Rusty, Osner, Irene, and Ben are going to fly to Las Vegas. Fern is coming for the summer. Henry and Leah say a sad goodbye to them. Miri reflects on how sometimes she cannot blame Natalie for hating Osner. Miri is also worried about traveling by air, but thrilled when they arrive on the West Coast safely. Jack and Christina arrive in Las Vegas a week later. Christina will become Daisy's second-in-command at the new office. Corinne moves to Birmingham to be with her cousin Tewky, and to put Natalie into another home if needed. Corinna has no idea how her marriage could have ended so quickly. She knows she must now start over.

Part IV, Chapter 35 – Rusty becomes pregnant by Osner. Natalie comes to visit before school starts. She says she hates what is going on, but may not hate Miri. The family takes them on tours of the surrounding area, including the Hoover Dam. What Natalie wants most on her visit – to see an atom bomb detonated – her father refuses to let happen. Natalie almost wants her father to ask her to stay, but knows that nothing will ever be the same. As a result, she knows things between her and her father are finished. The time comes for Natalie and Fern to leave. Fern cries. She does not want to go back, saying she likes Miri better than Natalie. Rusty decides to take driving lessons with Miri, because the age for a driver's license in Nevada is fifteen.

Thirty Five Years Later, February 10, 1987 – The unidentified woman on the plane is revealed as Miri, who is flying into Newark. She is now fifty. Christina and Jack are coming in on a later flight. Miri takes a room at the old Elizabeth Carteret Hotel, where Henry and Leah will also be staying. Miri is now married to a man named Andy, by



whom she three children, Malcolm, Kenny, and Eliza. Mason is also married with children. Fern is now a doctor. Osner's health is in decline, and Rusty and Daisy have stayed home to tend to him. Miri is now a writer for the Las Vegas Sun. Henry is now a writer for the Washington Post. Miri's relationship with her father and Frekki never goes anywhere beyond occasional visits or talks.

Miri and the others gather the next morning in the field behind Janet Memorial Orphanage, site of the third crash. Mayor Thomas Dunn speaks to those gathered about the events of the winter of 1951-1952. Clergymen read the names of the dead. Many people cry. The luncheon will occur at the Carteret Hotel following the ceremony where personal remarks shall be read by different people. Miri is stunned to see Mason again, finding he is still attractive. He gives her a ride to lunch. Miri sits beside the dead Secretary of War's daughter, and steals glances with Mason throughout the event.

Miri is called up to speak. She reads of the past always staying with one, about life moving on, and about how she and others will always be connected by "that winter." Gaby Wenders is the final speaker, introducing Mason and her husband, Dr. Larsen, and her grandchildren who all present a plaque to the city of Elizabeth. Natalie is now a famous author and fashion icon. Christina sees something is going on between Miri and Mason, and doesn't like it. Christina then runs into Zak Galanos, whose wife is an elementary school principal.

Mason hosts a private gathering for Gaby and her family. He invites Miri, who is first to arrive. Things are awkward at first, but then they speak of their families and the past. Steve was killed in Korea. Miri and Mason make peace with the past, and with each other. Miri returns the kaleidoscope so that Mason's daughter might have it. Mason asks her if she wonders what might have been. Miri says she does, and then goes to her room to call her husband. The next morning, Mason drives Miri to visit the graves of Irene and Ben. Mason then drops her off at the airport, kisses her, and wonders if someday something might happen. Miri emphasizes if.

Miri meets Natalie in the first class lounge of Newark Airport. Natalie is still strange and crude. Miri encourages Natalie to come see Osner before he dies. He doesn't have long left. On the plane home, Miri sits next to a little girl who worries about the safety drills and the words "in the unlikely event." Miri reassures the girl it is all merely a safety precaution. Natalie and her youngest daughter, 15-year-old Ruby, come to visit Osner for an early birthday party. Ruby and Eliza hit it off. Since the Elizabeth trip, Miri and her husband have grown closer. Natalie and her father apologize to one another and make peace. Natalie thanks Rusty for making her father happy. Christina and Miri see Natalie and Ruby off at the airport. Natalie and Miri hug. Miri decides to take time off from reporting to write a book about the events of the winter of 1951-1952.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the theme of family becomes stronger than ever. Miri, Rusty, Dr. Osner, Ben, and Irene all move to Las Vegas. Although Henry and Leah stay



behind for Henry's job, the families remain close. They remain close for the next three decades, during which time Miri and others begin their own families. By the time that Miri and Natalie return to New Jersey for a ceremonial observation of the tragedies 35 years before, their children are all teenagers or are in college.

Family remains of paramount importance to Miri and Natalie. Natalie, who has three children by three different men, seems to have avoided marriage or settling down with a man at all costs – mostly likely due to the divorce of her parents and the leaving of her father. Miri has a happy marriage with her husband, Andy, and the trip to New Jersey brings them closer together.

Much about Miri and Natalie has remained the same, but some has also changed. Miri is now a reporter following in her uncle's footsteps, while Natalie is a famous author and celebrity. Miri has remained very much grounded, but Natalie is still flighty and slightly neurotic, all owing to the first plane crash and hearing Ruby's voice in her head. Fortunately, Natalie and her father finally make peace with one another, apologizing for the past, and securing a bond of family that will last until her father's death.

In the end, the tragedy of the plane crashes, and the everyday tragedies of life, come to make all those involved stronger in some way, and diminished in others. Natalie's refusal to be married can be seen both as an aspect of strength, and of weakness in being unable to trust, for example. Miri is able to make peace with Mason after thirty-five years, and the encounter with him at the ceremony ultimately brings Miri closer together with her own husband.

The greatest tragedy of all is that things will never be the same. Whether it is a plane crash or time, the lives of all characters involved still would have changed. Perhaps they may have turned out differently; perhaps not. The question of what could have been is posed by Mason of Miri. The question of what could have been is not merely related to the planes – but to what could have been without Mason's cheating, without Mason's father being a drunk, without Natalie's period of mental illness, without Miri's mother having never told Mike about Miri from the start. Life is full of such questions, choices, events, and decisions.

The reader will remember how, earlier in the novel, the three plane crashes were each assigned a particular character (Ruby, Kathy, and Gaby), and how each character had a dream. The crash of the planes symbolized the failure of dreams. The end of the novel reveals that Miri has flown to New Jersey on her own, the plane landing safely and without a hitch. Here, though her life may not have turned out exactly as she had once envisioned it, the successful and safe landing is symbolic of Miri's dreams – of success and family – coming true.

Discussion Question 1

When Natalie comes to visit her father and Miri in Las Vegas in Part IV, what is the trip like? How does Miri act toward her father and toward Miri during the visit? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Miri insist on coming to the ceremony in New Jersey alone? What does she hope it will help her accomplish? Is she successful? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Natalie go to visit her father early for his eightieth birthday? What happens as a result? How does this affect Natalie? Does it change her nature or her perceptions of the world? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

succession, preclude, bedlam, bawling, revolutionary, perimenopausal



Characters

Miri

Miri Ammerman, who turns fifteen in the novel, is a resident of Elizabeth, New Jersey. The daughter of Rusty, granddaughter of Irene, and niece of Henry, Miri is a kind and thoughtful girl who, apart from having grown up without a father, has had a stable and secure upbringing. She is best friends with Natalie Osner, and begins dating Mason early in the novel after she and Mason dance at Natalie's birthday party. Miri witnesses the first of three plane crashes in the town firsthand, which startles her from her everyday routine. Through the novel, she develops great maturity in dealing with two more crashes and the drama that it brings, including her breakup with Mason when she discovers Mason is cheating on her, and the mental breakdown of Natalie.

Miri also struggles with the sudden reappearance of her father into her life, though the two never truly develop a father-daughter relationship. She later contends with her mother's marriage to Arthur Osner as Natalie threatens her friendship with Miri if Miri does not oppose the marriage. Miri refuses to oppose the marriage, and she and Natalie grow increasingly distant. Miri ultimately moves with her family and Osner to Las Vegas for Osner to begin a new practice there. Miri meets and falls in love with a man named Andy, having three children with him. She returns to Elizabeth 35 years later for a remembrance ceremony of the crashes. Now a journalist, she meets up with Mason and makes peace with him for the past. She reconnects in a limited way with Natalie, and Miri and Natalie's daughters begin a friendship. When Miri returns home, she and her husband grow closer.

Rusty

Naomi "Rusty" Ammerman is the mother of Miri, daughter of Irene, and sister of Henry. Rusty had a relationship with Mike Monsky when they were teenagers. After Mike cheated on Rusty, Mike left to enlist in the Army. Rusty, pregnant by him, refused to tell him she was having a baby girl. Rusty names the girl Miri. She and Miri are not only mother and daughter, but good friends as well. They tell each other everything, except when it comes to romance. Learning that Osner and his wife are divorcing, Rusty begins a relationship with Osner, ultimately marrying him.

Henry

Henry Ammerman is the uncle of Miri, brother of Rusty, and son of Irene. A reporter for the Elizabeth Daily Post, Henry produces a series of excellent stories on the three airline crashes which not only inform the public, but earn him great acclaim. Despite the greater tragedy of the crashes, Henry struggles to continue on with life as normal, mentoring Miri and planning his wedding with Leah Cohen. They are married in June.



Henry leaves the Post for a series of successive jobs, ultimately coming to work at the Washington Post by the end of the novel.

Irene

Irene Ammerman is the grandmother of Miri, the mother of Rusty and Henry, and the girlfriend of Ben Sapphire after the death of his wife in the first airplane crash. Irene is a sweet but stern woman who worries about both her daughter and granddaughter dating. In the greatest moments of tragedy among the plane crashes, Irene hands out simple but sage advice. She reminds Miri, and the rest of her family, to keep living. Life goes on, Irene explains.

Christina

Christina is an 18-year-old assistant at Osner's dental office, and helps out at Battin High School in business classes. She is jolted out of her normal routine by word that Ruby Granik is killed in the first plane crash. Ruby, who advocated living for oneself, inspires Christina to seize her dreams. That includes marrying the man she loves, Jack, even though her family opposes the idea since Jack is not Greek. Christina moves with Jack to Las Vegas when Osner brings his practice out there.

Natalie

Natalie Osner is the 15-year-old best friend of Miri. Natalie and Miri are inseparable when the novel begins, but after the first plane crash, their friendship slowly begins to unwind. Natalie begins to hear voices in her head, including that of Ruby Granik. Natalie insists Ruby is telling her to dance and how to eat. This leads to anorexia and mental exhaustion, resulting in Natalie being put into a rest home for a period of time. Natalie is disgusted when she learns her parents are divorcing, and her father is marrying Miri's mother. Natalie threatens what remains of her friendship with Miri if Miri does not stop the marriage. Natalie and Miri grow further apart, reconnecting only at the 35 year anniversary of the crashes. By then, Natalie has three children by three different men, owing to her distrust of men and marriage; and she is a celebrity author. She makes peace with her father just before he dies.

Dr. Osner

Arthur Osner is a dentist who owns and operates his own practice in Elizabeth, New Jersey. He is a kind and gentle man who is well-loved and well-respected in the community. He and his wife, Corinne, have a strained marriage which is broken by their differing approach to Natalie's illness. Arthur believes Natalie needs serious help; Corinne believes Natalie is merely sensitive. As the divorce proceeds, Arthur begins seeing Rusty, and the two ultimately marry. They are married for the next 35 years. Natalie is initially enraged by the marriage. By the end of the novel, Arthur's health is



failing. He and Natalie make peace with one another before he dies, apologizing for the past.

Mason

Mason is the 16-year-old boyfriend of Miri. Mason has an older brother named Jack, and a physically abusive, drunkard father whom he struggles to stay away from. Mason lives at the Janet Memorial Orphanage. During the third plane crash, Mason helps to rescue survivors, including Gaby. It is later revealed that Mason cheated on Miri with Polina, causing Miri to break up with Mason. Mason later remarries and has children. At the 35 year memorial, it is Mason who asks about what could have been had things been different.

Gaby Wenders

Gabrielle “Gaby” Wenders is a 22-year-old stewardess for National Airlines. She is living her dream as a stewardess when she becomes a survivor of the third plane crash. She is rescued from the fiery debris by Mason, and together with her family officially thanks the town of Elizabeth 35 years later.

Mike Monsky

Mike Monsky is the absent father of Miri who broke up with Miri’s mother, Rusty, after Rusty learned he cheated on her. Mike never knew of Miri’s existence until recently. Though he has his own family, Mike attempts to establish a father-daughter relationship with Miri without success.



Symbols and Symbolism

Planes

Planes are the primary means of air travel in the novel, with flights coming in to and out of nearby Newark Airport. Three planes crash in Elizabeth over the course of the winter of 1951-1952, leading residents to live in fear. The three planes are each given a single character – Ruby, Kathy, and Gaby – with dreams. The planes and plane travel themselves become symbolic of the pursuit of dreams; the crash of the planes become symbolic of the failure of dreams. The rescue of Gaby comes to symbolize the salvation of dreams even when things go wrong, and is reflective of the way Miri and Mason, and Miri and Natalie reconnect 35 years later.

Love Without Fear

“Love Without Fear” is a guide on love and sex written by Eustace Chesser. It is given to Christina by Daisy for Christmas. Daisy knows that, as a young woman, Christina has many different questions about love and sex, but answers from school, society, and family are not forthcoming. “Love Without Fear” is reflective of Judy Blume’s own career as a writer, in which she includes sexual advice and thoughts for young adults they might not otherwise have had access to.

Catcher in the Rye

“Catcher in the Rye” is a novel by J. D. Salinger which is read by Steve in the novel. Steve’s reaction to the plane crashes – specifically the death of his girlfriend, Kathy – disrupts Steve’s life and routine in ways he previously could not have imagined. He takes comfort where he can, but especially in “Catcher in the Rye”. Just as the character of Holden Caulfield has a difficult time making sense of what is real and phony in the world, Steve himself feels as if he has trouble discerning reality with the loss of Kathy. Nothing seems real anymore without her; everything seems phony.

Player Piano

“Player Piano” is Kurt Vonnegut’s first novel which involves a human revolt against a mechanized world. The book’s galley is given to Steve as a gift from Daisy. It comforts Steve to think that somebody truly understands him. In many ways, Steve feels as if he is human against a mechanized world – of machines like planes and automatic responses to tragedies like plane crashes. He feels alienated from the world in which he lives.



Petition

A petition is circulated and signed which argues for the closing of Newark Airport until safety precautions can be taken, and safeguards put in place to protect the residential areas around the airport. The petition receives many signatures at a town hall meeting attended by over a thousand people angry with the still-open airport.

Miri's article

Miri's article on the airplane crashes is originally submitted for publication in the Hamilton Headlines school newspaper. It is rejected by the school's administration because it is deemed to be too scathing and personal. Rejected by the paper, Miri has copies of the article printed up and handed out throughout school. Miri is kicked off the school paper for having done so, and is nearly expelled for the copies.

Dance floor

A dance floor is installed in the basement of Natalie's house after the plane crashes. Natalie, who has been hearing Ruby's voice in her head, believes she is being called upon by Ruby to be a famous dancer. Her father thus has a dance floor installed in the basement not only because Ruby wants to be a dancer, but because he hopes it will help to calm Natalie's nerves and restore her to sanity. Instead, it has the opposite effect.

Newspaper accounts

Newspaper accounts of the three airline crashes in Elizabeth are written by Henry for the Elizabeth Daily Record. The accounts examine both the crashes, their probable causes, and the human impact of the accidents. These articles propel Henry's journalism career to the point that he ultimately becomes a writer for the Washington Post. The articles about the crashes appear periodically throughout the novel, most often at the beginning of each chapter, providing factual context for the novel itself.

Hamilton Headlines

Hamilton Headlines is the student newspaper at Elizabeth High School. It is run by the students, but monitored and published by the school administration. Miri is a writer for the Headlines, and her story in response to the airline crashes is considered too vitriolic to publish. When she goes around the Headlines to hand out copies of the article on her own, Miri is forced to step down from working on the Headlines.

Leather notebook

Miri keeps a leather bound notebook with her during her travel to New Jersey 35 years after the crashes for the memorial ceremony. The notebook is a gift to Miri from Christina. There is one entry in the notebook, about the past staying with people, about life moving on, and about how everyone who lived through “that winter” will always be bound together by the crashes of the winter of 1951-52.



Settings

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a suburb of Newark, New Jersey. It is heavily residential and rests in the shadow of Newark Airport. Elizabeth is a peaceful, quiet community full of hardworking, good people. It is the home of Miri and her family, as well as all of the other main characters of the novel. Many of Elizabeth's residents, such as Rusty, commute to New York City for work, while others, like Dr. Osner, work in Elizabeth itself. Elizabeth becomes the scene of three successive plane crashes over the winter of 1951-52. The citizens of Elizabeth rally around those who have lost their homes and loved ones, and band together to call for Newark Airport to be shut down until safeguards can be enacted to protect the people living in the shadow of the airport.

Newark Airport

Newark Airport is a major flight center in Newark, New Jersey. Located just beyond the residential suburb of Elizabeth, Newark Airport is targeted by unhappy Elizabethans who fear for their lives, and are angry that their community has been rocked by three airliner crashes. The Newark Airport is ultimately outfitted with important safety precautions and safeguards, and becomes an example of the dire need for airport safety for the people living in the shadow of the airport.

New York City

New York City is located near Newark and Elizabeth, New Jersey. New York is the home of Ruby Granik, and is where she works as a dancer through part of the year. New York is also where Rusty works for a law firm. New York is where Ruby's flight originates from, and where her parents mourn her death.

Las Vegas

Las Vegas is a booming city in Nevada, just coming into its own in the 1950s. Las Vegas is visited by Dr. Osner on vacation early in the novel. His experience in Las Vegas, which he sees as an area of opportunity, attracts him in large part to ultimately move his business there. Marrying Osner, Rusty brings her family – including Irene, Ben, and Miri – to live in Las Vegas as well.

Elizabeth Carteret Hotel

The Elizabeth Carteret Hotel is located in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It is where many of the people flying in for the 35th anniversary of the plane crashes in Elizabeth, New Jersey,

are staying – among them, Miri and Mason. It is after the ceremony back at the hotel that Miri and Mason make peace with the past, and with each other. It is where Mason wonders aloud what might have been. Miri's stay in Elizabeth at the hotel ultimately brings her closer to her husband.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Coming of age is an important theme in the novel “In the Unlikely Event” by Judy Blume. Coming of age involves the personal, spiritual, moral, or emotional growth and maturation of an individual often based on real world experiences, events, or mistakes. Coming of age may occur quickly, slowly, or not at all. In the novel, the characters of Miri and Natalie are the ones to be confronted with events, situations, and tragedy which will test their character and either benefit or hinder them in terms of coming of age.

When the novel begins, Miri and Natalie are best friends. Their families are close. They attend the same school, and live in the same town. Elizabeth, New Jersey, is quiet, friendly, and close-knit. Miri and Natalie have both had stable upbringings, and their world appears to be like that of any other girls heading into their mid-teens. They have friends, attend school, watch TV, go to dances and parties, worry about whether or not they are pretty, and wonder about their lives in the future. They have had no share of horror or tragedy in their lives.

However, the three airline crashes in the winter of 1951-1952 have profound effects on Miri and Natalie. Both girls are understandably shaken by the tragedy that has befallen Elizabeth. Miri has the close, loving support of her family to help her make sense of the first crash, while Natalie appears to separate and detach herself from her family. Startlingly, Natalie says that she gets a buzzing sound in her head, after which she hears the voice of a dead passenger and dance Ruby Granik, and the sound of babies crying. Natalie tells no one else about this beyond Miri out of respect for Natalie’s friendship rather than Natalie’s health and well-being.

The second and third crashes shatter what remains of childhood for Miri and Natalie. People they know and love are killed. Entire blocks of the city are destroyed. Countless lives are ruined. While Miri struggles to make sense of the idea that all three crashes are mere accidents, helps care for victims with the community, and takes to writing a scathing article about the lives of the young mattering, Natalie continues to withdraw into herself. While Miri is proactively trying to help and make things better, Natalie begins dancing, taking dance classes in New York, has her father install a hardwood floor in the basement, and becomes anorexic.

The test of coming of age comes by way of two important events the reader should note. Miri, who at first wanted to, but did not tell anyone about the voices Natalie was hearing, finally alerts Natalie’s parents to her worsening condition when Natalie becomes purple-faced while refusing to stop dancing. Miri violates her friend’s trust to alert her parents, but she saves Natalie’s life. This demonstrates the degree to which Miri has matured, recognizing that friendship means nothing if Natalie is not alive.



When Natalie learns that her parents are divorcing, and her father is to marry Miri's mother, Natalie is enraged. She uses her friendship with Miri as leverage in a failed attempt to get Miri to break up the wedding plans. It demonstrates that not only has Natalie not grown from the experience, but she has become more immature and lost as a result.

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel "In the Unlikely Event" by Judy Blume. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Thematically, family may or may not appear as a wholly positive thing, and as a result, may fail the individual. In the novel, family appears in both positive and negative ways.

For Miri, family is a very positive thing overall. She lives with her mother, grandmother, and uncle in a two-family home. She often spends time with her mother, grandmother, and Uncle Henry, as a family and one-on-one. Her family is a force for good and provides a positive set of role models in Miri's life. For example, her grandmother helps Miri to see that life must go on, even in the face of tragedy like the plane crashes. Henry becomes a professional role model for Miri, who seeks to follow in his footsteps as a journalist. He also helps her to navigate the controversy surrounding her article on the airline crashes for the school newspaper.

However, family also has its drawbacks for Miri. For example, her mother and grandmother form a kind of cordon around the past, refusing to let Miri learn anything truly solid about her father, absent all her life. Indeed, her father's absence on her life is a negative thing, for Miri constantly wishes she had a father in her life. When Frekki visits, Rusty and Irene do all they can to keep Miri from Frekki, though they are unsuccessful.

As Miri later learns, Rusty never told Miri's father she was pregnant to begin with. Rusty's relationship with, and plans to marry Arthur Osner, are found out by Miri on accident when she walks in on them having sex. Miri is shocked by this. The new family arrangement with Arthur, however, ends up being one of happiness and stability when all is said and done.

Family for Natalie, however, is a largely negative thing. Her parents' marriage is fraying, and Natalie's mental instability proves to be the last straw. Natalie's mother and father disagree over whether or not their daughter is actually mentally ill, and whether or not their daughter should be put into a rest home. Further, the idea that Natalie's father begins sleeping with, and planning to marry Rusty before the divorce is finalized traumatizes Natalie to the point that she attempts to use her friendship with Miri as leverage to force Miri to wreck the wedding plans.



Natalie does not want her family to break apart because of a divorce, and Miri cannot blame Natalie for this at all. Miri, who has always wanted a father, never wanted it to be this way. Natalie hates her father for decades, only later apologizing and making peace with him a short time before he dies.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel “In the Unlikely Event” by Judy Blume. Friendship serves as a major unifying factor through the tragedy of the airline crashes for most residents of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and in turn helps to fuel the plot.

The novel begins with friendship, as best friends Miri and Natalie are watching the Christmas Tree lighting in Rockefeller Square on TV. Miri and Natalie are inseparable, and their families are very friendly with one another as well. Miri and Natalie do all they can together, from hanging out to attending school to attending parties and dances. Their friendship is one of the most important things either girl has. Indeed, the girls see it on a level almost equal to family.

However, the plane crashes quickly change things. Miri comes to learn that Natalie is suffering from hearing voices in her head – something which Miri helps Natalie to hide based on concern for her friendship with Natalie, rather than on Natalie herself. Only later does Miri commit to helping Natalie - not in defiance of their friendship, but in honor of it. The girls grow distant, as Miri is spending more time with Mason, and Natalie is spending more time with dance. When Natalie’s health seriously declines, Miri makes her move to tell Natalie’s parents about Natalie’s condition.

Natalie is subsequently treated and released from a rest home for her mental illness. At home, she learns that her parents will be divorcing, and her father will be marrying Miri’s mother. Enraged, Natalie threatens what remains of her friendship with Miri if Miri does not find a way to break off the wedding. Miri does not do so, and her friendship with Natalie becomes nothing more than an acquaintanceship that persists over 35 years. Only after the 35th anniversary memorial ceremony do Miri and Natalie seem to be approaching friendship again. Their daughters, in the meantime, have hit it off, and appear to be growing as friends as well.

Friendship abounds in other places in the novel as well. Christina’s friendship with Daisy leads not only to a better work relationship at Osner’s dental office, but to Daisy coming to understand that Christina needs help dealing with her traditional Greek family when it comes to love and romance. This leads Daisy to purchase the book “Love Without Fear” for Christina. Daisy’s friendship with Dr. Osner himself is also something important, as Daisy has come to look at Osner as a father. He is the source of good advice for her, and has given her a stable job and a purpose in life.

Henry later becomes the recipient of thoughtful gifts from Daisy, including galley proofs of Kurt Vonnegut’s first novel, and an issue of *The New Yorker* with the Salinger story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”. Daisy’s act of friendship helps comfort Henry in one of his



darkest moments, following the death of Kathy and determining to enlist in the Army. Henry reflects on the fact that Daisy may be the only person who truly knows him.

Romance

Romance is an important theme in the novel “In the Unlikely Event” by Judy Blume. Romantic love is essential in the novel, providing a contrast to, and bulwark against tragedy. Romantic love appears in numerous places even in the darkest points of the novel, adding proof to Irene’s contention that life must always go on.

Romance blossoms between Miri and Mason before and after the first crash. From their first dance where neither knows the other at Natalie’s party, to successive encounters, walks, kissing, and personal and intimate revelations to the other, Miri takes great comfort in the feelings she has for Mason. Indeed, she comes to fall in love with him, amazed at the depth and complexity of the love that she grows to have for him. The romance between them does not work out, as Mason cheats on Miri with Polina. This leads to their breaking up. Miri, years later, marries a man named Andy, and has three children with him. As her marriage and life with him progress, she grows closer and closer to him, rather than further away.

Rusty also has her share of romance in the novel. She keeps her romantic life a secret from her family, thinking she is protecting them from disappointments. Rusty, cheated on by Mike as a teenager, never told him about Miri. In the present time, Rusty begins a sexual relationship with Arthur Osner as Osner’s divorce proceeds, agreeing to marry him and move with him to Las Vegas. Irene herself begins dating Ben Sapphire, widower of a victim of the first plane crash. Henry himself proposes to, and marries, his longtime girlfriend Leah Cohen.

Steve Osner begins dating Kathy Stein, a girl a few months older than he is, who is in college. They quickly fall in love, and look forward to their time together when Kathy is home from school. Kathy is ultimately killed in the second airline crash, which devastates Steve and plunges him into depression. His love for Kathy is so profound that he decides to enlist in the Army rather than to attend college. He is ultimately killed in the Korean War.

At the end of the novel, Miri and Mason meet up again after the 35 year ceremony concludes. They make peace with the past. Mason wonders aloud what might have been had things been different. It is a question everyone asks themselves at some point or another, from Natalie to Christina to Steve. Mason suggests that romance may be possible again between he and Miri someday, but Miri pays this little attention. She is committed to, and more than happy with, her husband.

Tragedy

Tragedy is an important theme in the novel “In the Unlikely Event” by Judy Blume. Tragedies are terrifying, destructive, heartbreaking, dramatic and often unexpected



events, catastrophes, or disasters that have profound implications for those associated or involved with the tragedy. Tragedies usually have negative consequences, as is the case with “In the Unlikely Event”.

The tragedies referred to in this theme are the three airline crashes that occur in the winter of 1951-1952 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The flights that come down claim dozens of lives, both on board the planes and on the ground in the second two crashes. The third crash occurs in such a manner, however, as to allow for a handful of survivors, including Gaby Wenders.

The crashes throw the people of Elizabeth off completely. Elizabeth is a quiet, friendly community outside of Newark, full of decent people and close-knit friendships and families. No one suspects that anyone as tragic as three airline crashes, let alone one, will ever occur in a place like Elizabeth. The people of Elizabeth come to live both in fear and anger over the crashes. They are angry because the accidents are continuing with no safety precautions being put into place. They are afraid because they know their lives could end any minute. The reader will here remember Natalie’s chilling statement that “they are coming for us all.”

The community, thoroughly rocked, responds in various ways. More than a thousand citizens turn out at a town hall meeting to demand Newark Airport be shut down. The newspapers carry scathing critiques of the Airport. Members of the community band together to offer material and emotional support to those who have lost their homes or loved ones (or both) in the crashes.

Individual characters respond in different ways. Daisy and her sister take in Polina and her young son, Stash, giving them safety and shelter. Natalie becomes paranoid and mentally unstable. Natalie’s parents, under strain, divorce. Steve, brokenhearted over the death of Kathy in a crash, plunges into depression, refuses to attend college, and enlists in the Army instead. Rusty and Arthur Osner end up marrying and moving to Las Vegas, to escape the danger of crashes to start a new life. Irene begins dating Ben Sapphire, who himself lost his wife in the first plane crash.

Thirty-five years after the crashes, the community rallies together once more to hold a memorial ceremony. All those affected by the crash still living and able return. Among them is Miri. The crashes have forever marked the residents of the community, and no matter where they go or how far they try to get away, the crashes will forever bind them together.

Styles

Point of View

Judy Blume tells her novel “In the Unlikely Event” from the third-person limited-omniscient past-tense point of view; and the third-person limited-omniscient present-tense point of view. This is done for a few different reasons. The first and final sections of the novel are told in the present-tense point of view to distinguish them from the four parts between them which occur 35 years before, and to make it feel as if the reader is in the present time (being 1987). The four parts between are told in the past-tense, to distinguish the events of 1951-52 from the present. The limited-omniscient aspect of both present and past-tense parts adds a sense of realism and suspense to the novel, as readers do not know when the next airplane will crash, or how the characters of the novel will respond to those events.

Language and Meaning

Judy Blume tells her novel “In the Unlikely Event” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for two primary reasons. First, the novel incorporates dozens of characters, many of them minor, and numerous subplots that weave together under the overarching plot of the plane crashes. The simple and straightforward language employed in the novel allows the reader to more easily navigate the depth and complexity of the characters, situations, and subplots in the novel. Secondly, the novel features characters of all ages, genders, nationalities, and religious backgrounds, so the simple and straightforward language acts as a unifying voice that allows the reader to traverse the diversity of the novel.

Structure

Judy Blume structures her novel “In the Unlikely Event” into six primary parts. The first and final part of the novel occur in the late winter of 1987, and are written in the first-person present-tense perspective. The four parts of the novel between the first and last occur during the winter of 1951-1952. These four parts of the novel are subdivided into chapters, with each chapter numbered and given a title. Each chapter is further broken down into titled sections and vignettes. Each deals with a specific event within a sequence of larger events.



Quotes

After enough time it fades and you're grateful. Not that it's ever completely gone... We'll always be connected by that winter. Anyone who tells you different is lying.

-- Miri (Thirty-Five Years Later paragraph 5)

Importance: In the first section of the novel, Miri (then unidentified) is reflecting on the plane crashes of the winter of 1951-52 as she heads to New Jersey for a memorial ceremony for the dead. Though the memories of that time are no longer immediate, they still linger. Miri reveals that the crashes had a greater impact than merely a news story or a tragic event – but affected the people of the town of Elizabeth in unimaginable ways.

It's the second-worst air disaster in this country, the worst disaster since...

-- Henry (Part 1, Chapter 2 paragraph 149)

Importance: Not only does the first crash stun the residents of Elizabeth, but the wreck itself is so bad that Henry – a newspaper reporter – has difficulty recalling a similar or worse event. Elizabeth is a quiet residential community outside of Newark where crime is small and people are generally decent. Tragedies do not happen in places like Elizabeth, so the crash of the first plane leaves the residents stunned.

Rusty and Irene were masters of cleaning up, putting everything away, keeping things in order – things they didn't want to think about...

-- Narrator (Part II, Chapter 12 paragraph 77)

Importance: Following the visit of Miri's Aunt Frekki, Rusty and Irene pretend as if nothing has happened at all. Miri's aunt is the first real connection she has found to her father, absent all her life, and her mother and grandmother wash the visit over. It is in their nature to not discuss or speak about uncomfortable things. Such a thing is Miri's father, and another such thing is Miri's aunt. It causes Miri to wonder if there is more to the story than her father merely abandoning her mother.

Bad things happen in threes.

-- Irene (Part II, Chapter 14 paragraph 177)

Importance: Irene hands out a chilling prophecy to her family. The first airline crash will not be the only one. Two more airline crashes will follow. It is something unexpected and unpredicted, except by Irene. While Irene herself may not have specifically envisioned planes falling from the sky again, it is clear that she knows the tragedy Elizabeth has been rocked by is not the only tragedy it will ever face.

Miri tried not to listen, tried to believe what Henry had told her – that both crashes were accidents. But she wasn't convinced.

-- Narrator (Part II, Chapter 15 paragraph 6)



Importance: With the second crash, and Irene's chilling prophecy two-thirds fulfilled, Miri has a difficult time trying to wrap her mind around two airplane crashes in the same winter. She cannot understand how two similar events could be unrelated or merely coincidental, but Henry assures her both crashes are indeed accidents.

Life goes on.

-- Irene (Part II, Chapter 17 paragraph 1)

Importance: Henry and Leah get engaged, and plan their wedding for June. Miri has a difficult time wondering how anyone, in the midst of such tragedy, could plan something so beautiful and romantic as a wedding. Just as chilling as her prophecy about bad things happening in three, to Miri, Irene's assertion that life must go on is just as strange and chilling. If so many bad things are happening, Miri wonders, how could anything good happen?

Why won't you admit you're in love?

-- Natalie (Part III, Chapter 29 page 300 paragraph 62)

Importance: Miri's feelings for Mason are discussed by Miri and Natalie. Miri is indeed in love with Mason, though she has a difficult time admitting this to others because her love for Mason is so deep. She has been lulled into a sense of safety and stability with Mason. Miri's love for Mason reflects her feelings of safety and security in Elizabeth. Her love for Elizabeth has been shattered; her love for Mason will ultimately be shattered as well.

How someone his age, someone beautiful, someone he had dreamed about, someone he had kissed, could have stepped onto a plane one January afternoon and be dead an hour and a half later. How could that happen? How could that be real?

-- Narrator (Part III, Chapter 30 paragraph 1)

Importance: Steve Osner is devastated by the death of his girlfriend, Kathy, who becomes a victim of the second plane crash. For Steve, is only a few months younger than Kathy, the death is horrifying because not only did he love Kathy, but because Kathy is so young. She was so real, and now she no longer exists on Earth – something which Steve has a difficult time accepting. Her death seems unreal – and this helps propel Steve to connect with Holden Caulfield's search for the real in "Catcher in the Rye".

It could have been another plane, it could have been anything. Was this how it was always going to be? Always waiting for the next disaster?

-- Narrator (Part IV, Chapter 32 paragraph 17)

Importance: The thought process of Miri, and countless other Elizabethans, is recounted here by the narrator. The people of the town have come to live in perpetual fear for their lives, their loved ones, and their homes. No one truly feels safe anymore, and this leads to public anger against Newark Airport for not having closed after the first disaster, let alone remaining open after the second.



Don't act like everything's going to be okay, because it's not.
-- Miri (Part IV, Chapter 32 paragraph 39)

Importance: As if the tragedy of the plane crashes was not enough, in addition to Mason's cheating, Miri must confront the fact that her mother is seeing and sleeping with Natalie's father, who is in turn getting a divorce. Rusty tries to assure her daughter that everything will be okay, but Miri contends that it won't be. Too much has gone wrong.

Every effort must be taken to safeguard heavily inhabited areas from takeoffs and landings. Let us hope the Port Authority will take this lesson to heart before reopening Newark Airport.

-- Henry (Part IV, Chapter 34 paragraph 9)

Importance: In his final column for the Elizabeth Daily Post, Henry recounts the tragedies of the crashes, their causes, and their human cost. He maintains that residential areas must be protected against air traffic of any kind, and that the Port Authority should carefully consider when it reopens Newark. It reveals the depth of desperation and fear people have about the potential for successive crashes.

She could have waited until tonight and come with Christina and Jack on the company plane but she wanted to do this on her own.

-- Narrator (Thirty Five Years Later, February 10, 1987 paragraph 1)

Importance: Miri's return to New Jersey for the 35th anniversary of the plane crashes is something she does alone. While she will be meeting family and friends in Elizabeth, her decision to travel alone is based on her desire to confront the past, to overcome fears, and to realize that things have changed. It is only something she can do on her own.