

Invisible Monsters Study Guide

Invisible Monsters by Chuck Palahniuk

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Plot Summary

Invisible Monsters is a work of fiction by best selling novelist by Chuck Palahniuk. Invisible Monsters is a narrative on the search for one's identity. Shannon McFarland is a model who has been shot in the face, leaving her with a hideous disfigurement that will change her life forever. While adjusting to this new life, Shannon meets Brandy Alexander, a flamboyant transgender who teaches Shannon that a person's past does not have to define their future. Unfortunately, Brandy's past will define Shannon's future when she learns that Brandy is more than just a unique new friend. Invisible Monsters is a quick-paced novel filled with unique characters that will leave the reader gasping at each surprise turn in the plot.

Shannon McFarland is in the hospital recovering from a horrific gunshot wound when she meets Brandy Alexander. Shannon is essentially alone. Shannon's boyfriend has ended their engagement, and Shannon's best friend has stolen all her clothes while pretending to be the concerned friend. Shannon has not grieved for her loss, though she knows that she will never again work as a model. Shannon tries to get work with her hands or her feet, but even that is unsuccessful. Shannon has no idea what she will do when she is released from the hospital, but wastes little time worrying about it. On the day her bandages are removed, Shannon goes to the store without covering her wounds. Shannon is shocked at the reactions of the other customers.

Shannon meets Brandy Alexander in the speech therapist's office. Brandy Alexander tells Shannon that her past is not important. Brandy suggests that Shannon forget the past and rewrite herself in order to create a new future. Brandy also shows Shannon how to fashion veils for herself in order to hide her disfigurement. Shannon finds Brandy fascinating and they become fast friends.

When Shannon is released from the hospital, she goes to her friend Evie's home. Evie has to go out of town almost immediately on a modeling job and leaves Shannon alone. In the middle of the night, Shannon hears a car pull up outside and someone enter the house. Shannon goes downstairs to find her ex-fiance, Manus Kelley, poised to kill her. Shannon manages to lock Manus in a closet and tries to call for help. Unfortunately, Shannon's disfigurement makes it impossible for her to speak. Instead, Shannon sets the house on fire and locks Manus in the trunk of his car before stealing it.

Shannon turns to her new friend, Brandy, for help, sure that she will soon be arrested for arson. While waiting for Brandy to join her, Shannon learns that Brandy is really her brother Shane and that the story of his early death due to AIDS was a joke perpetrated on her parents because of the cruel way in which they threw him out of their home. Shannon, who has never liked Shane because she feels that her parents love him more than her, is angry, but desperate. Shannon needs Brandy to help her. Unable to confront Brandy with the truth, Shannon meekly follows her on a cross country trip to steal drugs and to search for Brandy's long lost sister.



On the road trip, Shannon poisons Manus slowly with artificial female hormones and plots to destroy both Evie and Brandy. Shannon puts into motion a plan to force Evie to give her the insurance money for the house that Shannon burned down. When Evie sends the money, she threatens to kill Shannon if she ever sees her again. When Shannon realizes that Brandy looks like her, she decides to set up a confrontation between Brandy and Evie. When the confrontation takes place at Evie's wedding, Brandy is shot. Shannon feels guilty for not trying to stop the shooting until she learns that Brandy and Evie know each other and that the shooting was faked. Later, Shannon decides to give Brandy her identification and disappear, allowing her brother to begin the new future he has wanted for so long.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Invisible Monsters is a work of fiction by best selling novelist by Chuck Palahniuk. Invisible Monsters is a narrative on the search for one's identity. Shannon McFarland is a model who has been shot in the face, leaving her with a hideous disfigurement that will change her life forever. While adjusting to this new life, Shannon meets Brandy Alexander, a flamboyant transgender who teaches Shannon that a person's past does not have to define their future. Unfortunately, Brandy's past will define Shannon's future when she learns that Brandy is more than just a unique new friend. Invisible Monsters is a quick-paced novel filled with unique characters that will leave the reader gasping at each surprise turn in the plot.

Shannon McFarland is at a wedding, standing at the bottom of a staircase watching the aftermath of a shooting. The bride, Evie Cottrell, is on the stairs with a shotgun in her hands, her wedding dress burned off and her hair burned to the scalp. On the floor lies Brandy Alexander, shot in the chest by Evie. The house is on fire behind Evie, and the wedding guests are all standing out in the foyer awaiting the fire trucks. Brandy Alexander begs Shannon to tell the story of her life before she dies. In order to tell the story, Shannon must reflect back on her own life, especially the past year. Shannon thinks about her family, her parents taking video of herself and her brother when they were young, and of her brother who died of AIDS several years before. Shannon then thinks back to a couple of days ago when she and Brandy were in the bathroom of a Vancouver home stealing drugs from the master bedroom.

Brandy has made up new names and stories for Shannon and their male companion. This is not the first time Brandy has done this, and Shannon finds it difficult to remember who she was before meeting Brandy. Leaving the male companion with the real estate agent, Shannon and Brandy go upstairs to search for drugs, hoping to find the artificial female hormones Brandy needs in order to continue preparing for her sexual reassignment surgery. Shannon finds the drugs and fills her purse with as many as she thinks they can get away with. Then Shannon fills Brandy's mouth with an overdose of painkillers at Brandy's request.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The point of view is established in the first few pages of this novel. The point of view is first person and the narrator is Shannon McFarland, though the reader will not learn her name until the final chapters of the novel. Shannon is at a wedding where a catastrophe has clearly taken place. The bride is burned and holding a shotgun. There is a shooting victim on the floor. Shannon clearly knows the shooting victim as the victim asks Shannon to tell her life story before she dies on the floor. Shannon is forced to think about her past as she considers this request.



The reader knows very little about Shannon at this point. The reader knows little about Brandy as well. However, as Shannon begins to recall her actions over the past few days, the reader begins to get a peek at her personality. Shannon appears passive, unconcerned with the things taking place around her. Shannon is with Brandy and a male companion in a home for sale in Vancouver. Brandy makes up names for Shannon and their male companion, leaving the reader in the dark as to her real identity. This lack of identification leaves the reader with the impression that Shannon's true name will be of importance at some point in the story. The fact that Shannon and Brandy are stealing drugs shows the reader that they are not ideal citizens, revealing another small impression of their characters and the events that will lead them to the catastrophic events at Evie's wedding.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Shannon catches her reflection in the mirror. Shannon is disfigured and the image causes her to think back on the day of her accident. Shannon was driving on the highway in Los Angeles when she was shot through the driver side window. Shannon managed to drive herself to the hospital where she was taken before the other patients, a fact that reestablished her faith in the kindness of strangers. That day, pictures were taken of Shannon's face, but she has not been allowed to see them. Others have seen them, including her ex-fiancé Manus Kelley, and her best friend, Evie Cottrell. Shannon wants to see the pictures, but Manus refuses to show her. Everyone is worried the sight of her disfigurement will cause Shannon to fall into an irreversible depression. Shannon was a model before the accident.

As Shannon lies in her hospital room recovering, she finds herself watching infomercials on television. One of these is an infomercial she did with Evie, on which Manus appeared. After the shoot, Shannon and Manus went sailing and Shannon felt that she made a fool of herself, but Manus did not seem to notice. It was a magical afternoon that would take on a different meaning later. After Manus ends their relationship, one of the nuns who works as a nurse at the hospital attempts to set Shannon up with several other disfigured patients in the hospital. Shannon is not interested in dating. Shannon is more concerned that she cannot talk, eat, or make a living. Shannon begins seeing a speech therapist, but finds it almost impossible to learn to speak as the therapist asks her to, like a ventriloquist who presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

On the day her bandages are removed, Shannon dresses up and leaves the hospital to go to a local grocery store. In the store, people do not look at her, except for a child who calls her a monster. In her confusion at the scene this causes, Shannon shoplifts a turkey, amused that no one tries to stop her. Back at the hospital, Shannon runs into Brandy Alexander in the speech therapist's office. Shannon has seen Brandy there before, but never spoken to her. Today Shannon tells Brandy that birds ate her face, explaining how her jaw bone and teeth were missing from her car after the shooting. Brandy is kind to Shannon, showing her how to fix a veil to cover her face and explaining that the past is not important, but the future can be anything she wants it to be.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Shannon sees her reflection in the mirror at the house in Vancouver and it causes her to reflect back on her accident and the day she met Brandy. Shannon was a model, giving the reader a stereotype with which to become acquainted with Shannon's character. The reader might assume that Shannon was conceited, concerned only with her looks, and that a devastating injury such as a gunshot wound that takes her lower jaw, would



cause a dark depression. Clearly, those around Shannon assume this will happen. However, Shannon does not appear to be depressed but curious about what she looks like now. This shows the depth of Shannon's character, suggesting that there is more to her personality than her looks.

Shannon was shot while driving down the highway, but calmly managed to get herself to the hospital. Most people would not be able to do this; therefore, the reader gets another glance at the strength of Shannon's personality. Shannon seems to be most impressed by the treatment she got at the hospital, with other patients allowing her to be treated first. Pictures were taken, but Shannon was not allowed to see these, leaving her begging her fiancé for a peek at her own face. The fiancé not only will not let her see, but he breaks off their relationship. Shannon does not seem to be heartbroken over this, raising questions as to the nature of the relationship. Finally, Shannon's bandages are removed and her first action is to go out into public. The reaction is cruel, leaving Shannon confused and somewhat downhearted, as the reader might expect.

Shannon meets Brandy Alexander after this experience. Brandy never asks Shannon her name, but instead gives her a new name. This will prove to be important later in the plot. Brandy tells Shannon that the past is not important, but that the future can be anything she wants it to be. Shannon likes this idea. Brandy also helps Shannon fashion a veil so that she might go out in public without causing the reaction she received at the store. Shannon likes Brandy, this meeting implying the beginning of a lasting friendship.



Chapters 4-7

Chapters 4-7 Summary

Shannon, Brandy, and their male companion are stopped at the Canadian border as they are attempting to cross and return to the West Coast. Brandy tells the border guard wild stories about their identities, making him believe they are part of a televangelist family. When the guard insists he will need to see their passports, Brandy freshens her lipstick and promises to get them out of this mess. Shannon's mind wanders, and she begins thinking back to one afternoon while she and Evie were at Brumbach's Department Store. Evie and Shannon used to like to hang out in the furniture displays, putting on impromptu dramas for the other shoppers. Shannon remembers one time in particular when Evie attempts to get Shannon to admit that she did not know for certain that her brother was dead.

After crossing the Canadian border, Shannon sits in the back seat while Brandy and their male companion are in the front of the rental car. The male companion, now calling himself Seth, is talking about how television is a metaphor for life. Ever since Shannon began sneaking artificial female hormones in Seth's food and drinks, he has become very introspective. Shannon is hoping the overdose of hormones will cause Seth's liver to fail. At the same time, Brandy is reading an autobiography she found in one of the houses where they stole drugs. The autobiography is about an actress who survived a bad childhood to become a star. Brandy is inspired by this actress and the way she has purged her soul by writing her autobiography. Brandy encourages Shannon and Seth to do the same thing.

As they continue their car trip to Seattle, Shannon reflects on the last Thanksgiving she spent with her parents before her accident. Shannon's mother had a new tablecloth, so Shannon asked if it was a gift since it did not seem to be the type of tablecloth her mother would buy. Shannon's parents explain that they originally bought the cloth to be a square for her brother Shane on the AIDS Memorial Quilt. However, they could not decide on a design that would not have some hidden meaning in the gay community, so they made a table cloth instead. Shannon is embarrassed by the sexually explicit nature of the conversation and angry with her brother for dying of AIDS and putting her in this position.

Chapters 4-7 Analysis

Shannon thinks about a time when Evie tries to get her to admit that she did not see her brother dead; therefore, she cannot know for sure he is dead. At the time, Shannon thought this was just a game Evie played for the crowd watching them. The readers believe the same thing, but might change their opinion later as the plot continues to develop and this episode proves to have a deeper meaning for Shannon and those around her. Shannon also admits at this point, as she watches Seth become more



introspective than he has ever been before, that she is putting female hormones in his food and drink. The reader finds this amusing until Shannon admits that she is doing this in order to kill Seth slowly. The reader does not know Seth's true identity at this point, therefore is confused as to why Shannon would want to kill him. However, the reader suspects that Seth's real identity will have something to do with Shannon's dislike of him.

Shannon also recalls a time when she went home for Thanksgiving and the conversation turned into a graphic description of the symbolism of shapes and colors in the gay community. As Shannon recalls this rather bizarre Thanksgiving, the reader is given insight into her relationship with her family members. Shannon does not like her brother because first he was the child in the family who got the most attention and second because his death has become something of an obsession for her parents, a theme of the novel. Shannon's brother appears to play an important role in this novel, having been mentioned twice in this group of chapters, though the reader is not clear what this role is at this point, since Shane is dead.



Chapters 8-11

Chapters 8-11 Summary

Shannon has not told her parents about her accident, instead telling them she is out of the country for several months on a modeling job. Shannon does not want the drama that would come with telling her parents what has happened to her, a drama she knows would be nothing like the drama that took place when her brother, Shane was fifteen when he was burned by an exploding can of hairspray. Shane was always the favorite child until he contracted a sexually-transmitted throat infection at sixteen.

Shannon, Brandy, and Seth arrive in Seattle and go directly to the Space Needle. At the top, Brandy gives everyone postcards and tells them to write their deepest, darkest secrets on them. Seth writes a bunch of stuff about how television is a metaphor for life, while Shannon writes that she loves Seth so much she must destroy him because no one will ever love her again. Shannon throws the card off the side of the observation deck before Brandy can read it aloud as she has all the others. However, when they return to their car, Shannon is mortified to find that this card has landed on the windshield and that Brandy has found it.

Shannon thinks back to when she first met Brandy and they spend hours at a time locked in the therapist's office, talking and making veils. Brandy tells Shannon that there is nothing more mysterious than a woman wearing a veil, hiding her face and forcing the world to imagine what lies behind. Shannon compares it to a trick her father used to use with the pigs he raised. Shannon's father would feed the pigs calorie rich bakery products to increase their weight in the days before he would take them to market. Shannon's thoughts return to the present as Brandy tucks her into bed before Brandy and Seth go to sell the drugs they have gathered over the past few days. While lying in bed, Shannon comes across the infomercial she and Evie did the day Manus took her sailing. Shannon notices this time a look shared between Evie and Manus that she missed the many times she viewed this same infomercial in the past. Shannon feels stupid because all she noticed before was how beautiful she was.

The infomercial makes Shannon think back to when she first got out of the hospital and Evie invited her to stay in her large home her wealthy parents bought for her in the country. Evie had to go on a modeling job in Cancun, so she left Shannon to house sit. Left alone, Shannon finds the majority of her (Shannon's) clothes, stretched and worn out, hanging in Evie's closet and a rifle under the bed. That night, Shannon hears someone pull up in the driveway and then a window breaking downstairs.

Chapters 8-11 Analysis

Shannon admits to the reader that she has not told her parents about her injury, leaving the reader with the impression that Shannon has given up on trying to get her parents'



approval, perhaps a show of maturity on her part. This admission also allows the reader to see how alone Shannon is, perhaps explaining her reliance on Brandy. At the same time, Shannon, Brandy, and Seth arrive at the Space Needle in Seattle. Brandy, inspired by an autobiography she has been reading, encourages Shannon and Seth to write down their secrets and allow them to fly over Seattle. Shannon does this, but does not allow Brandy to read the confession before letting it go over the side of the observation deck. However, Brandy later finds it on the car and reads it, much to Shannon's horror. Shannon's secret is that she does not believe she will ever be loved again, leaving the reader with the impression that she is still grieving the loss of her beauty due to her accident.

Later, Shannon lies in bed and watches an infomercial she did in the past with Evie and Manus, her ex-fiance. Shannon is devastated when she notices for the first time a look that passes between Manus and Evie. Shannon never noticed before because she was always focused on her own beauty, not the other people starring in the infomercial. However, it is now clear that there was something between Evie and Manus, leaving Shannon feeling like a fool for believing that Manus was in love with her. These realizations led Shannon back to the night she got out of the hospital and stayed at Evie's to housesit. Shannon discovers that Evie has stolen all her clothes, an invasion of her privacy that seems pale in comparison to the affair about which Shannon has just admitted knowing nothing. This theft shows Evie's lack of morals and her jealousy of Shannon in that she felt the need to steal her clothes and boyfriend. Evie is not a good friend but was the only friend Shannon had. Perhaps this helps explain why Shannon becomes obsessed, a theme of the novel, with Brandy after her (Shannon's) injury.



Chapters 12-14

Chapters 12-14 Summary

The last Christmas before her accident, Shannon went home. Instead of buying large, expensive presents, Shannon and her parents agreed to stick to stocking stuffers only. Shannon begins to pull the gifts out of her stocking and discovers that her parents gave her many boxes of condoms in order to encourage her to be careful not to suffer her brother's fate. As Shannon pulls these boxes out of her stocking, her parents lecture her on sexually transmitted diseases and lists the types and consequences of the various infections and diseases she could contract through sexual intercourse. Shannon is horrified, but even more shocked to see that Shane's stocking also includes gifts. Inside his stocking, Shannon discovers that her parents have bought a membership to P.F.L.A.G.: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Back at Evie's the night Shannon was released from the hospital, she goes downstairs to confront the burglar with Evie's rifle. However, Shannon discovers that the burglar is Manus, her ex-fiance, come to murder her in her sleep. It is this night that Shannon learns that Manus and Evie have been having an affair and that they both believe the other shot Shannon in order to get her out of the way. The reader also discovers in this chapter that Seth and Manus are one in the same. Shannon forces Manus into the closet where she discovers more of her stolen clothes. Shannon then calls her parents for help but cannot speak clearly enough for them to understand what she is saying. Instead, Shannon's parents believe they are receiving their first crank call from hate-crime perpetrators. They almost seem excited at the prospect.

During this phone call, Shannon recalls visiting her parents on her last birthday before the accident. Shannon's parents were so convinced that they were the objects of hate-crime perpetrators that they kept the curtains drawn, the lights off, and forced Shannon to eat in the dark. Then Shannon realized that her parents had forgotten her birthday and instead planned to march in a gay pride parade and wanted her to go with them. Shannon is outraged by all this because she can remember the day her brother left the family home. Shannon's parents threw him out because they learned that he had a sexually transmitted disease and that he was gay. Shannon also turned her back on her brother, refusing to allow him into her room after the confrontation with their parents. Shane burned all of Shannon's clothes on the clothes line before disappearing. It was not long after that that Shannon's parents got a phone call telling them their son had died of AIDS.

Chapters 12-14 Analysis

Shannon's parents are clearly obsessed, a theme of the novel, with their son's lifestyle and death. Perhaps it is guilt that causes this obsession, but whatever it is, it is harming their relationship with Shannon. Shannon has always felt second best in her household,



especially after her brother was burned and the family was investigated by child welfare. However, this obsession with AIDS, leading her parents to give only condoms to Shannon for Christmas, is taking things a step too far. Shannon's parents then decide that they are targets of hate-crimes, causing them to treat Shannon with disrespect, forgetting her birthday. This obsession causes Shannon to hate her brother more than she did before and to wish he had never been a part of her life. This feeling on Shannon's part is sad, leaving her angry and bitter toward someone who cannot defend himself and is not the cause of the jealousy. The relationship between Shannon and her brother is odd, full of jealousy and guilt, but one sided, since Shane is dead. The reason Shannon continuously mentions her brother is unclear, except to the extent that it shows the depth of her character to the reader.

Shannon is alone in Evie's house when Manus breaks in with a knife. Manus intends to kill Shannon, believing he is finishing the job that Evie began when she shot her. Manus believes that Evie shot Shannon so that he and Evie could be together. Evie believes that Manus shot Shannon so they could be together. It is unclear to the reader who shot Shannon, and Shannon herself seems unconcerned with the mystery. Shannon is heartbroken when she realizes that her fiancé and best friend were having an affair. Shannon becomes outraged at both, burning down Evie's house and forcing Manus into his own car at gunpoint. Now the reader knows that Manus is Seth, so now the reader knows why Shannon wants to destroy Seth. Shannon loves Manus, but needs to hurt him as payback for the hurt he caused her.



Chapters 15-20

Chapters 15-20 Summary

Back at Evie's house the night Manus attempts to kill Shannon. Shannon lights the house on fire, drugs Manus, and then forces Manus into the trunk of his own car. Shannon then calls Evie and allows her to listen to her house burning down. Shannon drives quickly to the Congress Hotel where she knows Brandy Alexander lives with three drag queens, the Rhea Sisters. As Shannon waits for Brandy to gather her things, the Rhea Sisters tell her how they took Brandy in after her own family threw her out and how they have cared for her in a way no one else ever has. The Rhea Sisters show Shannon a picture of Brandy's sister and tells her how Brandy wants to have surgery to make her look just like her sister, though the Rhea Sisters have no clue why Brandy would want to look like someone who never cared about her. Shannon is shocked when she sees the picture because it is a picture of her. Shannon realizes that Brandy is her brother, Shane.

It is not until this point that Shannon realizes that Brandy has never asked her her real name, but has always called her by made-up names. Suddenly Shannon also realizes that the phone call informing her parents that Shane has died of AIDS was all a joke perpetrated by these drag queens. Shannon is filled with rage at Shane/Brandy, but she cannot express it because she cannot speak. Instead, Shannon simply leaves the hotel with Brandy in tow. Shannon thinks to a time when she and Brandy were in the home of some rich woman and Shannon is feeding Brandy pain medication. Shannon wants to kill Brandy, but she realizes Brandy has such a high tolerance for the medication that she will never overdose. Shannon realizes she must come up with some other way to kill her. While feeding Brandy the pills, Shannon listens as Brandy talks about the day her parents threw her out of their house.

Brandy is a big fan of plastic surgery, having endured a great amount of it since beginning her transformation from Shane to Brandy. Brandy thinks Shannon should have plastic surgery in order to repair her face. Shannon knows this is possible, although the doctors have told her it takes years of painful, humiliating procedures. Brandy knows all about this, since she has had several ribs removed without her knowledge to make her waist appear smaller. On the night Brandy and Shannon began their road trip, Shannon recalls pulling over at a local make out spot and opening the trunk to reveal Manus, huddling in the truck with dozens of mementos from his childhood that his mother gave him on his last visit home. Shannon has decided she will blackmail Evie for the insurance money for her house as punishment for what she has done. Shannon also decides to play it safe; she will initiate a road trip, telling Brandy she will help her find her sister.



Chapters 15-20 Analysis

Shannon shows more emotion in these set of chapters than she has before, breaking out of her apathetic attitude when she learns that her fiancé and her best friend have been having an affair behind her back. Shannon kidnaps her fiancé and burns down Evie's large home that her wealthy parents bought for her. This loss is most likely more emotionally than financial for Evie because her parents are rich and willing to spend their money on her. Due to this fact, Shannon decides to blackmail Evie into giving her the insurance money on the house. In the meantime, Shannon needs a place to hide so that she will not be arrested for arson or kidnapping. Shannon decides to go on an extended road trip.

Before Shannon makes the decision to run away, however, she learns that Brandy, the woman she has come to admire and has built a friendship with, is really her brother, Shane. Shannon dislikes Shane because of what his death did to her relationship with her parents and how his presence in childhood eclipsed her own presence in the family. Shannon hates Shane. However, Shane does not hate Shannon. Shane has decided he wants to look like Shannon. Shannon is shocked and angry to learn about Brandy, but once again showing the reader her true character, she decides to use Brandy in order to keep herself safe. Shannon also decides that she wants to find a way to kill Brandy. Shannon is now attempting to kill both the people with whom she is traveling—Brandy and Manus. It turns out that Shannon is not as shallow as the reader might have expected, but she has low morals when it comes to forgiving and forgetting.



Chapters 21-25

Chapters 21-25 Summary

Shannon reflects back on the time when she first met Brandy. Brandy helped her deal with the self confidence issues that came with her injury. Shannon found herself occasionally wishing she was still beautiful and could continue her modeling career, but learned she could not even be a hand or foot model. Shannon then thinks of the days right after they left Los Angeles together, how Manus taught them to steal drugs in homes that were for sale. At the same time, Shannon sent a letter to Evie asking for the insurance money, telling her that she had facial reconstruction surgery and was back to being beautiful and that if Evie does not do as instructed, Shannon and Manus will go to the police and claim she shot Shannon.

After Los Angeles, Shannon and her companions moved on to Santa Barbara where they sold Manus's car and rented cars as they moved up the coast toward Canada. As they move along the coast, Shannon keeps suggesting to Brandy that her sister might be in the next big city. Shannon also reflects on Manus' past, how his career as a cop went downhill because of his inability to attract gays looking for male prostitutes. Manus went to extremes to keep his level of sexuality up, including buying sexy clothes and frequenting gay bars, but ended up losing his job instead. Shannon also recalls a photo shoot at a slaughterhouse where she told Evie how her brother's accident with the exploding hairspray can led to an investigation of abuse, fueled by frequent phone calls to the authorities. Shannon also recalls how she told Evie that Shane most likely put the can of hairspray in the trash himself to get attention.

Shannon also recalls shopping with Brandy one day and Brandy telling her a story of how her father would cheat people who would come to their farm and buy potatoes, unaware that the bags were stuffed full of rotten potatoes. Brandy also told Shannon about the nights when her father would wake her and her sister to go salvage goods fallen out of train wrecks. Shannon remembers one of these episodes and believes the hairspray can that exploded on Shane was one of the items salvaged from one of these trains. Brandy also tells Shannon how she was approached one day by a male police officer who claimed to be following up on the abuse investigation into his burns. The cop coaxed Brandy, then Shane, into performing sexual favors. It was from this cop that Shane contracted the throat infection that would lead to his parents throwing him out of the house. Shannon realizes that Brandy is talking about Manus, that Manus is the cop who molested Shane.

Chapters 21-25 Analysis

In a twist of irony, Shannon reveals that Manus, the cop, is the one who taught she and Brandy to steal drugs from homes for sale. Manus is no longer a kidnapping victim, it seems. However, the reader is suspicious that if Manus knew Shannon claimed he



would testify against Evie in court accusing her of shooting Shannon, that his hypocrisy might not go that far. It seems that Manus might not love Shannon enough to lie for her in court, especially since he also attempted to kill Shannon. However, bringing up this idea causes the reader to wonder once again who did shoot Shannon.

The reader learns a great deal more about Brandy in these chapters. It seems Brandy is a more sympathetic character than the reader once suspected. Brandy was raped by a cop after the prolonged investigation into his burn injuries, an investigation that was stretched out due to some anonymous calls that kept the child welfare department in the picture. It was this sexual assault that led to the illness that would see Brandy thrown out of her family's home. The reader feels more sympathy toward Brandy, especially when Shannon adds the stories of how their father would cheat people and steal items from train wrecks, pegging him as a less-than-honorable person. Perhaps growing up in such a household might explain some of the behaviors both Shannon and Brandy have exhibited. However, the reader is not sure what Shannon thinks about these revelations, especially when she realizes that the child molesting cop is none other than Manus, her bisexual ex-fiance.



Chapters 26-32

Chapters 26-32 Summary

Shannon begins thinking she needs to find a better way to kill Brandy. As she is thinking this, Shannon finds the postcard from the Space Needle in Brandy's book and realizes it is the card she wrote and tried to hide. Brandy now tells her that she will love Shannon forever and offers to be a family with her, just the two of them. Shannon is grossed out by the idea of being proposed to by her brother. Brandy also confesses that she never wanted to be a woman, she simply thought the idea of sexual reassignment surgery was the ultimate method of self mutilation. Brandy also confesses to envying Shannon because of her disfigurement.

Shannon goes to the post office in Seattle and picks up the package Evie sent with the money in it. Along with the money, there is a note threatening to kill Shannon should she ever come near Evie again. This threat gives Shannon a great idea on how to get Brandy killed. When they return to Los Angeles, Shannon, Brandy, and Manus decide to hit one more house. They select a home in the West Hills only to discover that it belongs to Evie Cottrell. Evie is selling her home because she is about to get married. Not only this, but Evie's mother announces to anyone who will listen that Evie used to be a man. Shannon is shocked by this news, but when she thinks it over she realizes it makes sense. Evie's mother invites Shannon, Brandy, and Manus to the wedding. They arrive properly dressed and enjoy the reception. Soon, however, Manus and the groom go missing. Moments after realizing what they are up to, Evie discovers her house has been set on fire. Realizing who must have done it, Evie grabs her rifle and goes looking for Shannon. Instead of targeting Shannon, however, Evie shoots Brandy who looks just like Shannon once did.

Shannon could have stopped the gunshot, but she did not. However, Shannon stays close to Brandy, consoling her in her death throes. Shannon tells Brandy her life story, confessing that she is her sister, that she was jealous of the attention everyone paid Shane after the hairspray accident. Finally, Shannon confesses to having shot herself in the face because she no longer wanted to be beautiful. Brandy confesses to having placed the hair spray in the trash herself. Evie then tells Shannon that the whole thing was an act, that Brandy is wearing a bullet proof vest. Unfortunately, Evie missed the vest. Shannon later learns that Evie and Brandy knew each other all along, and it was Evie who told Brandy about Shannon's accident, setting them up to meet. In the hospital, after Brandy's surgery to repair the gunshot wound, Shannon gives an unconscious Brandy all her ID, allowing her to write her own future anyway she wants.

Chapters 26-32 Analysis

Shannon learns that Brandy only wanted sexual reassignment surgery because it was self mutilation. Brandy also confesses to having put the full can of hairspray in the trash



as well, in another attempt at self mutilation. These confessions lead the reader to believe that Brandy does not like the person she is and cannot accept herself, a theme of the novel, and that she has done these things in the hopes of making herself a different person who is more likable. In another ironic twist, the reader learns that Shannon has done a similar thing by shooting herself in the face in order to live a life that is not defined by her beauty. Not only is this ironic because of the parallel to Brandy's actions, but it is ironic because Manus and Evie have both allowed themselves to be manipulated because they believe that one or the other shot Shannon, when in reality Shannon is the only would-be murderer here.

Shannon also learns that Evie was once a man like Brandy. This news comes as a shock, not only because of their friendship, but because of Manus' relationship with her. However, Shannon soon realizes that Manus is gay, so his part of the situation is not so unusual. Shannon remains angry with Evie, so she decides to burn down her new house. In the process, Evie becomes enraged at Shannon and decides to kill her, but shoots Brandy by mistake. It is after the shooting, which is actually where the novel opened, that Shannon begins her story and confesses her sins to her brother. Brandy and Evie then reveal that the whole thing was just an act, but unfortunately, Brandy is really shot. It is a comical twist of fate that leaves everyone grappling with the secrets that have been revealed. Finally, though, Shannon has found some sort of peace with her brother. Gripped with jealousy and hatred most of their childhood, Shannon has now found a way to forgive her brother and to give him a gift that will prove her desire to be forgiven by him.



Characters

Shannon McFarland

Shannon McFarland is the narrator of the novel, but the reader does not learn her name until the final chapter of the book. The novel begins with Shannon at the bizarre scene of a house fire and a shooting. As Shannon consoles the shooting victim, she promises to tell the woman's story. To do this, Shannon begins with her own story. Shannon is the victim of a shooting herself. Shannon, who was once a model, has lost her lower jaw due to a shooting that took place while she was driving. Shannon manages to keep her calm and drive herself to the emergency room where she discovers kindness still exists when the other patients in the emergency room allow her to go in front of them.

Shannon slowly recovers from her injuries in the hospital. Shannon's boyfriend ends their relationship and her best friend has stolen all her clothes, but these things do not bother Shannon. Shannon has met a new friend in the hospital, a woman named Brandy Alexander, who is bigger than life and who convinces Shannon that all she needs to do is to recreate herself. Shannon is fascinated by this take on her situation, so when she finds herself in trouble, she turns to Brandy Alexander. Unfortunately, while turning to Brandy for help she discovers that Brandy is not who she says she is. Brandy, it seems, is Shannon's presumed dead brother.

Shannon has never liked her brother. Shannon believes that her parents love her brother more than her. When Shannon was still a teenager, her brother was kicked out of the house by her parents when a medical issue proved to them that he was gay. A few years later, Shannon's parents received a phone call informing them that their son had died of AIDS. However, Shannon now knows this is not true. The phone call, it turns out, was a horrible prank played on the parents to punish them for kicking their son out of the house. Shannon remains with Brandy, however, because she needs help. Shannon has become obsessed with Brandy, but at the same time plots her death. Shannon takes Brandy to the home of a friend who blames her for burning down her house. Shannon hopes this friend will mistake Brandy for Shannon and kill her. The plan works and Brandy is shot, but it turns out that Shannon's friend and Brandy knew what she was up to all along.

Shane McFarland/Brandy Alexander

Shane McFarland is Shannon McFarland's brother. Shane is the favorite child of the McFarland family whose position is further solidified when he is fifteen and burned on the face when a can of hairspray exploded in the trash he was burning. Shane was rushed to the hospital and treated for his burns; however, the burns also set off an investigation by the child welfare department. The investigation lasted several months while the agency attempted to find proof that Mr. McFarland somehow caused Shane's injuries. Eventually, however, these allegations were proven false.



A year or two later, Shane had a throat infection that turned out to be a sexually-transmitted disease. Shane's parents kicked him out of the house. Shane tried to get Shannon to let him in her room, but she refused. Shane set Shannon's clothes on fire and disappeared. Several years later, the McFarland's received a phone call informing them that Shane had died of AIDS; however, it turns out that Shane never contracted the disease.

While Shannon is in the hospital, she meets Brandy Alexander. Shannon turns to Brandy when she sets Evie's house on fire, only to learn that Brandy is actually Shane. Shane is in the middle of having sexual reassignment surgery. In fact, Shane has reached the last step before the actual surgery. When Shannon shows up, Brandy runs off with her without question, telling Shannon that she (Brandy) wants to find her sister. Shannon agrees to help despite knowing she has already found her sister. Shannon travels around with Brandy, running schemes to steal drugs, for several months before finally setting Brandy up to be shot by Evie. However, after the shooting, Shannon learns that Brandy and Evie have known each other for years and that Brandy has known all along who Shannon is.

Evie Cottrell

Evie Cottrell is Shannon's best friend before the shooting. Evie and Shannon go to modeling school together and then share many modeling jobs together. Evie is a dramatic person who likes to put her life out where people can see it. Evie enjoys going to a local department store and playing out her life for people to watch. During some of these impromptu dramas, Evie asks Shannon repeatedly about her brother, trying to force Shannon to admit that she does not know for sure that her brother is dead. Shannon never really admits this fact, but Evie continues to push the issue for a reason that is not clear until later in the novel.

Evie, it turns out, has been having an affair with Shannon's fiancé, Manus Kelley. Shannon has no clue until the night after she is released from the hospital when Manus breaks into Evie's house to kill Shannon. Shannon is so infuriated by this betrayal that she lights the house on fire and kidnaps Manus. Shannon then turns to Brandy, who takes her and Manus on the road for many months under the guise of searching for Shannon. While on the road, Shannon blackmails Evie into giving her the insurance money for the house. After Shannon has the money, she sets Brandy up to come face to face with Evie, hoping Evie will believe Brandy is Shannon and will kill her as promised. Evie does in fact shoot Brandy, but it turns out Evie and Brandy have known each other for years and that Evie told Brandy about Shannon's accident. The shooting is faked, with Brandy wearing a vest. It also turns out that Evie is also a transgender, having had her surgery some time before meeting Shannon.



Manus Kelley

Manus Kelley is Shannon's fiancé. Manus is a cop who met Shannon when he came to her parent's house one afternoon looking for Shane, hoping to follow up on a case he had worked some time in the past. Manus works vice while he is with Shannon. Manus' job is to catch men who solicit male prostitutes. However, after a time, Manus becomes too recognizable or old to attract these men. Manus becomes obsessed with making himself more attractive to these men, buying sexy clothes, studying homosexually-themed magazines, and visiting gay bars. Shannon is aware of all this, but believes it is only for his job.

When Shannon is injured, Manus quickly ends their relationship. Manus cannot be with a woman who looks like Shannon does now. However, when Shannon gets out of the hospital, she learns that Manus and her friend, Evie, have been having an affair. Manus believes that Evie shot Shannon and Evie believes that Manus committed the crime. To protect each other, Manus goes to Evie's house to kill Shannon; however, Shannon hears him enter the house and she stops him. Not only does she stop him, but Shannon burns down Evie's home in her anger and then kidnaps Manus. Shannon takes Manus along on a months long road trip with Brandy, feeding him female hormones the whole time in the hope that the overdose will cause him to die of liver failure. Later, Shannon finally faces the proof that Manus is gay.

Sister Katherine

Sister Katherine is one of the nurses at the hospital who takes care of Shannon. Sister Katherine is convinced that Shannon needs love to get her through the tragedy of losing her lower jaw. After Manus breaks up with Shannon, Sister Katherine begins scouring the hospital for men who have also suffered catastrophic facial wounds who could fall in love with a woman who looks like Shannon looks now. Shannon finds Sister Katherine's actions humorous, but has no intention of meeting any of the men of whom Sister Katherine tells her. Shannon does not believe that love will heal what ails her.

The Rhea Sisters

The Rhea Sisters are three transvestites who have made a fortune both from selling a talking doll and from their entertainment act. The Rhea Sisters took in Shane McFarland not long after he was kicked out of his parents' home and were behind the horrible hoax perpetrated on the McFarland family when they were told their son had died of AIDS. The Rhea Sisters convinced Shane to have sexual reassignment surgery and have paid for all his surgeries up to this point. The Rhea Sisters consider Shane family and intend to continue paying for his medical bills for as long as he wants them to. After Shane is shot, he is taken to the hospital because the bullet managed to miss the bullet proof vest. The Rhea Sisters come to the hospital and repair his makeup, bringing back Brandy after Shane has surgery.



Mr. and Mrs. McFarland

Mr. and Mrs. McFarland are Shane and Shannon's parents. The McFarland's blame Shannon for Shane's burns after the incident with the hairspray can, believing that Shannon put the can in the trash. Shannon hotly denies this, but later admits she was the one who made several calls to the authorities, causing the child welfare workers to extend their investigation into the family. Later, when Shane comes down with a sexually-transmitted disease, the McFarland's kick him out of the house, and Shannon turns her back on him. However, the McFarland's later embrace Shane's gay lifestyle when they receive a phone call informing them that Shane died of AIDS. The McFarland's learn everything they can about homosexuals and AIDS, joining support groups, walking in parades, and nearly making a square for the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The McFarland's also come to believe they are becoming targets for hate crimes because of their support of the gay lifestyle.

Speech Therapist

At the hospital where Shannon recovers from her gun wound, she works with a speech therapist who tells her that learning to talk again without a lower jaw will be easy. The therapist insists that if Shannon can learn to speak like a ventriloquist, she will be able to speak again like a normal person. Unfortunately, Shannon has no luck with this technique. At the same time, the same speech therapist is teaching Brandy how to speak more like a woman. Brandy finds the woman obnoxious and often makes fun of her behind her back. It is while Brandy is seeing the speech therapist that Shannon becomes aware of Brandy and it is in the speech therapist's office where Brandy and Shannon meet frequently while Shannon is still in the hospital.

Child Welfare People

After Shane McFarland suffers burns to his face, the child welfare department becomes involved. The child welfare people believe that Shane was abused by his father and that abuse, not the accident with a hairspray can, is the cause of the burns. Shane insists that the burns were an accident, as do his parents, but the welfare people continue to get phone calls insisting that something is not right in the McFarland home. Later it is revealed that these calls came from Shannon. Eventually, the child welfare people decide that there is no abuse taking place in the McFarland home and drop the case. However, soon after, Shane is visited by a police officer who claims to be making a follow-up report on the case. This cop forces Shane to commit sexual acts with him, introducing Shane to the homosexual world. Later, the reader learns that this cop is Manus Kelley.

Mrs. Leonard Cottrell

Mrs. Leonard Cottrell is Evie Cottrell's mother. Mrs. Cottrell is from Texas where her family has made their fortune in oil. When Brandy, Shannon, and Manus return to Los Angeles they decide to hit a few more houses before quitting. The house Brandy chooses that day turns out to belong to Evie. Evie's mother is acting as the real estate broker, showing them around the house. Mrs. Cottrell explains that the house is for sale because Evie is finally getting married. Mrs. Cottrell further explains that the marriage is an arranged marriage because it is so difficult to find a man to overlook the fact that Evie was once a man. Shannon is shocked to hear this news because she never suspected. However, later when the reader learns that Brandy and Evie know each other, it is clear how they met in a support group for men contemplating sexual reassignment surgery.



Objects/Places

Scarred Face

Shannon has been shot in the face, leaving her horrifically scarred. Shannon's brother, Shane, also suffers from a scarred face as the result of a can of hairspray that exploded while he was burning the trash.

Veils

Shannon wears veils to hide her face, a trick Brandy Alexander taught her.

Houses for Sale

Brandy, Manus, and Shannon spend several months touring the Western states and parts of Canada, pretending to be prospective home buyers or the employees of prospective home buyers in order to steal medication from people's medicine cabinets.

Artificial Female Hormones

Brandy and Shannon both have secretly been feeding Manus artificial female hormones, in part hoping to kill him and in part to punish him for past abuses.

Sexual Reassignment Surgery

Brandy Alexander, aka Shane McFarland, is waiting to receive sexual reassignment surgery to permanently turn him into a woman. Shane is undergoing this surgery not because he wants to be a woman, but because he feels it is the most outrageous thing he can do to his body.

Pictures

Pictures were taken of Shannon's face after she arrived in the emergency room. Everyone is allowed to look at the pictures except for Shannon herself.

Reconstructive Surgery

Shannon is offered reconstructive surgery in order to repair her damaged face. However, Shannon does not want the surgery because she is tired of being pretty.



Birds

Shannon tells Brandy Alexander that her face was eaten by birds after having been told that her jaw bone and missing teeth have vanished from her car and are suspected to have been taken by birds.

AIDS

Shannon's parents believe their son died of AIDS because of a phone call they received from a stranger stating this fact. In reality, their son is alive and well, and about to undergo sexual reassignment surgery.

AIDS Memorial Quilt

Out of guilt, Shannon's parents have embraced the gay movement and AIDS research in an effort to reconnect with their presumed dead son. The parents decide to make a panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt but cannot decide on a design due to supposed double meanings of certain fabrics, therefore they decide to make a table cloth instead.

La Paloma Memorial Hospital Emergency Room

Shannon drives herself to the La Paloma Memorial Hospital Emergency Room after she has been shot in the face.

Brumbach's Department Store

Brumbach's Department Store is a store where Shannon and Evie like to go after modeling school in order to put on spontaneous plays for fellow shoppers in the furniture department.

Taylor Robert's Modeling Academy

Shannon and Evie meet while they are students at the Taylor Robert's Modeling Academy. Shannon is a good student, but Evie tends to be awkward and ungraceful.

Los Angeles

Shannon lives in Los Angeles and it is here that Shannon is shot in the face.



Themes

Inability to Accept Oneself or Others

Shannon McFarland has suffered a terrible gunshot wound to her face. While her life is not in danger, Shannon has lost her bottom jaw and is horribly disfigured. As a model, this injury is devastating, not only taking away Shannon's beauty, but her source of income as well. Shannon should be devastated. However, Shannon takes her injury in stride, wishing she could see what she looks like but prevented in the hospital by a staff who believes the sight will cause her to fall into a dark, desperate depression. Once again, Shannon surprises the reader, venturing out to a grocery store with her face open for all to see, walking with her head held high even as a small child calls her a monster. Later the reader finds out that Shannon has suffered this wound because she wanted to stop being beautiful, that she was tired of the attention she gained with her looks alone. Shannon shot herself because she no longer wants to coast through life on what her beauty can do for her. Shannon cannot accept herself, so she decides to change herself.

Shane also does not like himself. Shane once put a full can of hairspray in the trash so that it would explode when he burned the trash. As a result, Shane's face was burned and his family spent several months under the watchful eye of the local child welfare office. Later in life, Shane decides to have sexual reassignment surgery, not because he wants to be a woman, but because it is the most outrageous thing he can think to do to himself. Shane enjoys the pain and discomfort of injuring himself and of changing his body in ways that will make him stand out more in a crowd. Shane wants to be unique, to be different from the person he was born to be. Shane does not accept the dullness of his birthright, but wants to be outrageous and unique.

Shane's parents cannot accept that their son is gay. Shane's parents learn that Shane has a sexually-transmitted disease that he could only have contracted through contact with another man, so they throw him out of their house. Shane disappears and the next time his parents hear of him is in an anonymous phone call from a stranger telling them Shane has died of AIDS. As a result of this news, Shane's parents dive headfirst into support groups and the unique culture that surrounds AIDS and the gay community. Shane's parents attempt to make a square for him for the AIDS Memorial Quilt, march in gay pride parades, and join support groups for family members of gay men who have died from AIDS. Shane's parents become almost obsessive about the gay movement, imagining hate crimes against them that do not exist and forcing their newly-gained knowledge on their daughter, who could care less that her brother was gay.

Obsession

Shane's parents adore their son. When Shane is injured in a garbage accident, Shane's parents become obsessed with his welfare to the detriment of their daughter, Shannon.



Shannon feels as though her parents have forgotten her after the accident, causing her to make frequent phone calls to the child welfare office in order to keep their investigation ongoing so that Shannon will feel as though someone is paying attention to her. Later, after their parents throw Shane out of the house, Shannon continues to feel ignored as her parents become victims of their son's behavior. When the family learns that Shane has supposedly died of AIDS, Shannon's parents become obsessed with everything about AIDS: memorial quilts, parades, support groups. Shannon comes home from Christmas only to receive a stocking full of condoms and a lecture on the many diseases that can be passed on through sexual intercourse.

Shannon, too, becomes obsessed. After her accident, Shannon meets Brandy Alexander. Brandy is so different from everyone Shannon has known before that Shannon quickly allows Brandy to take over her life. Even when Shannon learns that Brandy is really her brother, Shane, Shannon continues to follow Brandy all over the country and into Canada, hoping to find the perfect moment to kill Brandy/Shane. Shannon has become obsessed with the idea that Shane has ruined her life through his simple existence. However, when Shane is shot, Shannon realizes that she has been a poor sister and she decides to give Shane what she believes he wants, her own identity. Shane has been obsessed with becoming Shannon because she is a beautiful woman he admires and wants to emulate. During this time, Shannon also becomes obsessed with the idea of killing her ex-boyfriend, Manus. Manus has been having an affair with Shannon's best friend, Evie, and attempted to kill Shannon in order to protect Evie, whom Manus believes shot Shannon. Shannon feeds Manus artificial female hormones, hoping the overdose will cause his liver to fail. It is because of these obsessions propelling the plot that obsession is a theme of the novel.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is a theme of the novel because it is a part of the main story line and several of the subplots. Shane McFarland, Shannon's brother, is gay. As a teenager, Shane contracts a sexually-transmitted disease, allowing his parents to find out that he is gay. Shane's parents throw him out of the house, outraged at this immoral behavior. However, later, when Shane's parents receive a phone call informing them that Shane has died of AIDS, the parents embrace the gay lifestyle and the victim's role that being a parent of a young man who has died of AIDS offers them. Ironically, not only is their son not dead, but he is alive and in the middle of having sexual reassignment surgery. The reader suspects that if Shane's parents were aware of this, they would be outraged, but then embrace the support groups that would welcome them into their fold.

Homosexuality also appears in the subplot dealing with Shannon's ex-boyfriend, Manus Kelley. Manus Kelley is a vice cop who specializes in trapping johns looking for a male prostitute. Enticing these men becomes something of an obsession with Manus, causing him to spend his money on homosexually-themed magazines and sexually-appealing clothing. When Manus becomes too well known to trap these men, he becomes more obsessed, believing it is his age that is causing the men to not want him any longer. Soon Manus loses his job. As he travels with Shannon and Brandy



Alexander, Manus becomes more in touch with his feminine side, in part thanks to the hormones these ladies are feeding him without his knowledge, leading him to have a sexual encounter with Evie's new husband on the afternoon of her wedding.

Evie, too, has faced homosexual issues. At the end of the novel, Shannon learns that Evie was once a man. As a man, Evie was interested in men as well as the beautiful clothes and makeup that women wear. Evie convinced her parents that she was meant to be a woman and manages to get them to pay for her to have sexual reassignment surgery. When Shannon learns this, she also learns that Evie and Shane have known each other for many years and that Evie told Shane long before Brandy Alexander and Shannon met that Shannon was in the hospital with a gunshot wound to her face. It was Evie that arranged for Brandy Alexander and Shannon to meet and Evie who conspires with Brandy to fulfill Shannon's desire to see Shane shot.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrator, Shannon McFarland, tells the story in a random fashion, beginning at the end and jumping around quickly throughout most of the story, coming back to the same place where she began.

Shannon tells the reader from the beginning that she is not telling her own story, but that of Brandy Alexander, and that she intends to tell it as though it was written in a glamor magazine, perhaps one that she herself posed for during her short modeling career. Shannon is aware that this is a unique story; therefore, she wants it told in a unique fashion.

The point of view of this novel works because it focuses the attention of the reader on the narrator, Shannon, only to the point of sympathizing with her. The reader listens to her story, aware that it is supposed to be the story of Brandy Alexander, only to find that Shannon appears to be focusing on her brother a great deal more than might be expected. Therefore, when Shannon reveals that Brandy Alexander and her brother are one in the same, the reader is not surprised and understands why Shannon has told as much about herself as she has. The focus seems to move closer to Brandy Alexander and away from Shannon, fulfilling the promise made at the beginning of the story. However, the reader eventually learns that by telling her brother's story, Shannon has actually been telling her own story. Due to this unique double narration, the point of view of this story works well.

Setting

The novel is set mostly in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a place where many young people go in order to become rich and famous. Due to these aspirations, Los Angeles is filled with many beautiful people, as well as unique personalities who believe they have some unique quality that makes them superstar material. Shannon is a model in this environment, a woman that people give special favors to just because she is beautiful. Shannon has a best friend who is also beautiful, if larger and less graceful. Shannon also meets Brandy Alexander here, a woman awaiting the surgery that will finalize her transformation from the man God made her into the woman she wants to be.

The setting of this novel works because only in Los Angeles could one find such a unique cast of characters. Shannon, the model, Evie, also a model, and Brandy Alexander, the transgender friend, who transforms Shannon's whole outlook on the world around her. It turns out that Evie is also transgendered, born a man but now a woman, something Shannon does not learn until after the friendship has ended. These are unique characters that would be completely unbelievable should the novel have been set in small town America or the Midwest. It is because of the characters that the setting of the novel works.



Language and Meaning

The language is simple English. The narrator uses many name brands and unusual color names in her descriptions of the people around her, especially when it comes to describing Brandy Alexander. The narrator also uses many brand names when she talks about the drugs she and her friends steal from the homes they rob. These brand names and unique colors do not add more clarity to the descriptions, but add a sense of authority that deepens the descriptions and give them more power. The narrator also uses some slang phrases of which a reader might not be familiar, especially when Shannon's parents are describing the secret meanings of specific colors and materials in the gay community.

The language in this novel is used not only to present a simple text for readers of all abilities, but also to add descriptive power to the novel in such a way that certain words lend authority to the text. The writer drops name brands and unique color names into the descriptive passages in order to allow the reader to feel as though the writer knows something about these unique brands and colors that are superior to the reader's knowledge. The author wants the reader to believe that these people are special because of who they are and what they know about fashion, drugs, and money. This uniqueness about the characters is what sets them above the average person and what makes them interesting enough for the readers to spend their time reading about them.

Structure

The novel is divided into thirty-two chapters. Each chapter is relatively short, containing at most ten pages, at the least three or four. The chapters jump around chronologically in the story, where one might take place at the time of Shannon's accident, while the next will take place months after the accident, or before the accident. The narrator tells the reader at the beginning of the novel that the story will be presented in a round about way that is reminiscent of how a magazine presents stories. This unique time line can be confusing for the reader at times, but is often fascinating as little bits of secrets come out slowly in each time line.

The novel contains one main story line and several subplots. The main story line follows that of the narrator, Shannon McFarland. The story begins with Shannon promising her friend, Brandy Alexander, that she will tell Brandy her (Shannon's) life story before Brandy dies of a gunshot wound she has just received. The story then flashes back to when Shannon suffered a gunshot wound herself and met Brandy Alexander while in the hospital recuperating. Later, Shannon turns to her new friend for help when she foils her ex-boyfriend's attempt to end her life. Unfortunately, Shannon learns that her new friend is really her brother who has begun the process of having sexual reassignment surgery. Shannon is so angry with her brother that she conceives the idea to use another friend's anger at Shannon and her brother's resemblance to Shannon to induce the other friend (Evie) to kill her brother. A subplot follows the disintegration of

Shannon's relationship with her friend over an affair she had with Shannon's ex-boyfriend. Another subplot follows the unorthodox behavior of Shannon's ex-boyfriend.



Quotes

"Where you're supposed to be is some big West Hills wedding reception in a big manor house with flower arrangements and stuffed mushrooms all over the house. This is called scene setting: where everybody is, who's alive, who's dead." Chapter 1, pg. 11

"Most of my adult life so far has been me standing on seamless paper for a raft of bucks per hour, wearing clothes and shoes, my hair done and some famous fashion photographer telling me how to feel." Chapter 1, pg. 13

"'Don't let me die here on this floor,' Brandy says, and her big hands clutch at me. 'My hair,' she says, 'My hair will be flat in the back.'" Chapter 1, pg. 17

"Don't expect this to be the kind of story that goes and then, and then, and then. What happens here will have more of that fashion magazine feel, a Vogue or a Glamour magazine chaos with page numbers on every second or fifth or third page. Perfume cards falling out, and full-page naked women coming out of nowhere to sell you makeup." Chapter 2, pg. 20

"Sister Katherine was the kind of nun who wears a wedding ring. And married people always think love is the answer." Chapter 3, pg. 35

"Jump to just before my bandages come off, when a speech therapist says I should get down on my knees and thank God for leaving my tongue in my head, unharmed." Chapter 3, pg. 51

"'When you realize the story you're telling is just words, when you can just crumble it up and throw your past in the trashcan,' Brandy says, 'then we'll figure out who you're going to be.'" Chapter 3, pg. 61

"We're supposed to sit and eat with Shane dead all over the table in front of us." Chapter 7, pg. 91

"The third most boring thing in the entire world is your sorry-assed past. So Brandy never asked me anything. Bulldozer alpha bitch she can be, we meet again and again in the speech therapist office and Brandy tells me everything I need to know about myself." Chapter 9, pg. 112

"The way my face is without a jaw, my throat just ends in sort of a hole with my tongue hanging out. Around the hole, the skin is all scar tissue: dark red lumps and shiny the way you'd look if you got the cherry pie in a pie eating contest. If I let my tongue hang



down, you can see the roof of my mouth, pink and smooth as the inside of a crab's back, and hanging down around the roof is the white vertebrae horseshoe of the upper teeth I have left. There are times to wear a veil and there are not. Other than this, I'm stunning when I meet Seth Thomas breaking into Evie's big house at midnight."
Chapter 13, pg. 136

"Jump way back to the last time I ever went home to see my parents. It was my last birthday before the accident. What with Shane still being dead, I wasn't expecting presents."
Chapter 14, pg. 144

"Waiting for Evie to burn to death, everybody gets a fresh drink and goes to stand in the foyer at the foot of the stairs." Chapter 29, pg. 276



Topics for Discussion

Who is Brandy Alexander? Why is Brandy visiting the speech therapist at the hospital? Is the meeting between Shannon and Brandy coincidental or planned? Why does Shannon become obsessed with Brandy? Is it Brandy's personality that draws Shannon to her or something else?

Who is Shane McFarland? Why does Shannon hate him? Why did Shannon's parents throw Shane out of the house? Why does Shannon and her parents believe Shane is dead? Why did Shannon not let Shane into the house the night her parents threw him out? Why did Shane light their clothes on fire?

Why did Shane put a full bottle of hairspray in the trash? Did Shane want to disfigure himself? Compare this act to Shannon's accident. Why did Shannon shoot herself in the face? Why did she pretend it was an accident? What was Shannon attempting to achieve? How does Shannon's actions compare to Shane's?

Who is Evie Cottrell? How did she and Shannon become friends? Why does Evie steal all of Shannon's clothing after her accident? How does Evie's admiration of Shannon parallel Brandy's admiration of Shannon? How does it differ? What else do Brandy and Evie share?

Who is Manus Kelley? Is Manus gay? Why does Manus become obsessed with his inability to catch gay men soliciting male prostitutes? Is Manus the same cop who molests Shane, giving him the illness that results in his parents throwing him out? How does this affect Brandy's feelings for Manus?

Why does Manus attempt to kill Shannon? What was Manus attempting to achieve with this action? Was Manus protecting himself or Evie? Did Evie know what Manus was planning? Did Evie plan the entire episode? What was Evie attempting to achieve?

Why does Shannon turn to Brandy when she believes she is in trouble for burning down Evie's house? Why does Shannon continue to rely on Brandy even after she learns that Brandy is really Shane? Does Shannon hate Shane or are do her feelings stem from sibling rivalry?

Why do Shannon's parents become obsessed with AIDS and support groups? Why do they give Shannon a stocking full of condoms for Christmas? Why do Shannon's parents believe they will become targets of hate crimes? Do Shannon's parents want this to happen? How does this obsession with AIDS show the depth of, or lack thereof of, their affection for their children?