

It Happened to Nancy: By an Anonymous Teenager, a True Story from Her Diary Study Guide

It Happened to Nancy: By an Anonymous Teenager, a True Story from Her Diary by Beatrice Sparks

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Contents

It Happened to Nancy: By an Anonymous Teenager, a True Story from Her Diary Study Guide	.1
Contents	2
Plot Summary	3
April	4
May	6
June	7
July	8
August	9
September	10
January	11
February	12
March	13
April and May	14
June, July and August	16
September through February	17
March, April and Epilogue	19
Characters	21
Objects/Places	25
Themes	28
Style	30
Quotes	32
Topics for Discussion	34



Plot Summary

It Happened to Nancy was written for young adults by Beatrice Sparks from the notes of an anonymous young girl whom Sparks names 'Nancy.' The book opens when Nancy is fourteen years old and regularly sick with asthma. At a Garth Brooks concert, Nancy meets an eighteen-year-old boy named Collin who is kind and loving to her. Nancy is overwhelmed with love for him and thinks that he has changed his life forever and for the better. Collin eventually seduces Nancy, gets her drunk, and rapes her in her own house. After trying to recover psychologically, Nancy finds herself getting sicker and eventually finds out that Nancy had HIV.

Nancy faces a horrible tragedy but she is fortunate enough to have a loving mother and several very close friends called "the gaggle," that consists of Nancy, Dorie, Red and El. They also spend time with a popular, handsome, and honorable boy named Lew who Nancy eventually starts to date and falls in love with. In contrast to Collin, Lew is not out to seduce Nancy and would never hurt her. In fact, he makes them both promise to not have sex until they are married. Nancy's father, who lives in Phoenix while she and her mother live in South Carolina, also cares for Nancy deeply and does what he can for her when she stays with him. Nancy also has several supportive doctors throughout her illness and many hospitalizations. Even when Nancy withdraws due to depression, her friends and family are there for her, as are the comforts of her faith.

Nancy quickly declines from HIV to AIDS due to an already weak immune system. The book is set in the early 1990s before the discovery of drugs that block the HIV virus from becoming AIDS. At that time there is no effective AIDS treatment. Nancy is going to die and it is only a matter of when. Nancy is naturally a happy and bright teenager and handles her decline surprisingly well. She remains upbeat when she can, although she is of course frightened and in pain throughout much of her illness. Near the end of her life, Nancy spends a final few weeks living with her aunt and uncle in Idaho on a ranch, which practically functions as hospice care.

It Happened to Nancy is composed of Nancy's diary entries throughout the years of 1992, 1993, and 1994. The author, Beatrice Sparks, includes an appendix full of information about HIV and AIDS for young adult readers.

Controversy surrounds *It Happened to Nancy* due to accusations that it is not a genuine non-fiction work. Some have questioned whether Sparks wrote the book simply in order to raise AIDS and date-rape awareness. A number of important errors fill the book that indicates either the author's sloppiness or its falsification. Nonetheless, *It Happened to Nancy* is a powerful work that promises comfort to teenagers with HIV and AIDS and information for other teens to prevent them from being infected.



April

April Summary and Analysis

Nancy's story begins on Saturday, April 14th. She is excited about going to a Garth Brooks concert with her friends El, Red, and Dorie. She enjoys the concert enormously and is so excited that she can hardly contain herself. While leaning against a post, she has an asthma attack all alone. No one seems to care until a boy pulls her down the stairs into the foyer. The boy's name is Collin and after Nancy calms down, they begin to talk. Nancy feels surprisingly comfortable. He is eighteen and from South Carolina like she is. He lives on campus and is on scholarship.

They talk about their families. Nancy's parents are divorced and she lives in Phoenix in the summers. Collin's parents were killed in a car crash. Collin grows worried that Aunt Pauline, Nancy's chaperone, has not tried to find her. He then offers to take her home. Nancy's mother and Aunt Pauline are furious.

On April 16th, Collin calls to see if Nancy is okay. Her mother lectures her on talking to strangers but Nancy feels like this case is different. Collin wants her to meet him in the park that evening and said that she impresses him with how articulate and open she is. Nancy feels that Collin needs her because he has so little family. They have another good meeting at the park. Nancy tells Collin that she is only fourteen and he says that he knows. Collin also keeps calling Nancy "His girl." Nancy's mother is too busy to notice.

Nancy receives a white daisy from Collin while she is at school on April 17th signed "Your White Knight, I hope." Nancy cries incredibly hard and is overwhelmingly happy. On the 20th, Nancy notes that she sees Collin again after school. Collin rarely talks about himself and likes listening to Nancy. While in the park, Collin touches Nancy's legs and it makes her feel uncomfortable. Nancy also has not told her friends about Collin because she thinks they would not like it given how old Collin is. On April 22nd, they plan to cut school on Monday to spend time on the river.

On April 23rd, Collin and Nancy have a wonderful and romantic breakfast and then they find their way to an island. The morning overwhelms Nancy with joy. On the 24th, Nancy talks about how much she likes Collin but notes that they are more like family than lovers. That day, Nancy cannot focus on schoolwork. Collin calls that afternoon and offers to come over to fix dinner for them. When he comes, they enjoy a wonderful dinner but he wants to drink alcohol with her and she goes along. They dance and touch each other. As the time goes on, Nancy realizes that she has promised to stay the night with El and calls her friend to say she does not feel well.

So Collin and Nancy continue to drink wine coolers and Collin mixes in a little bottle of something that ruined the taste. He then tells her that their relationship is evolving into something romantic. At midnight, Collin picks up Nancy and takes her into his mother's



room. She struggles, cries, and begs him to stop. She tells him that she thinks that it is a sin. Collin does not care and Nancy bites him. He rapes her anyway. Nancy's body and feelings are hurt. She notes that when the rape ended, Collin just leaves.

Nancy wonders if she should talk to her mother or a priest. She stays up all night and cannot sleep. She notices that she is no longer happy, but just an empty box of loneliness. Nancy takes several showers but still feels dirty and continually worries that she has created a mortal sin. At 8:00 am Nancy calls St. Peter's Parish and tells Sister Martha that she has been raped. The Sister alleviates her worries about going to hell. Nancy then falls asleep for the whole day. When Nancy's mother comes home, she does not tell her anything but she desperately wants to connect to her.

When April 27th comes, it has been three long and boring days. Her mother thinks that she is sick and she has not seen any of her friends. Collin still will not call and Nancy thinks it is because he is embarrassed over what he did. She wants to call him a few hours later. When she does, the university notes that there is no Collin Eagle registered there. They never heard of him. After throwing up, Nancy calls her mother and tells her everything.

The next day Nancy's mother decides to take her on an "adventure" and excuses her from school for a few days to go to the beach.

May

May Summary and Analysis

On Tuesday, they go back home and have good time. Nancy is so confused about him. On Wednesday, El, Red, and Dorie are so glad to see her. On the 5th of May, Nancy is able to play flute at State with the band. The next few days Nancy feels totally empty. On her birthday, her mother and her friends throw a surprise party for her. She is now fifteen. On the 13th, Nancy and her mother have a great mother's day. On the 18th, Dorie wants to make their male friend Lew a member of their "gaggle."

On the evening of the 19th, Lew and Nancy spend some time alone together. They have known each other for a long time since before her parents divorced. They talk during the movie their friends are in. Nancy feels like Lew is starting to take care of her.

May 20th comes and Nancy sees Collin walked with Margie Muller on the river. Nancy wants to "scratch his eyes out." Margie is only in seventh grade and Nancy decides to help Margie in the morning. On Tuesday, two days have passed. Nancy has an asthma attack and is drowsy from medication. For that whole week Nancy is groggy and cries for Margie. On Saturday she starts to recover but still cannot get Collin and Margie out of her mind.

On Sunday, May 27th, Nancy saves a bird's life and she and her mother decide to keep it. Caring for it helps Nancy to not think about Collin. They call the bird Imperical. Nancy sees Margie on May 30th and it is clear that Collin has raped her from her appearance. Nancy is determined to move on with her life, although she hopes Margie will be able to get over it.

June

June Summary and Analysis

On June 6th, school gets out. On June 7th, the gaggle goes out to Red's uncle Bill's cabin on the lake. Nancy thinks that it is beautiful up there. Three days later after dinner, Lew and Nancy go for a long walk. Nancy thinks Lew is wise and mature beyond his years. His parents teach at the university and his brothers are older. Nancy lets herself think about marrying him and mentions that she wants to go into medicine. Lew and Nancy both want kids as well. Lew's mom then got MS and his father found another woman. The two then discuss divorce.

That afternoon, Uncle Bill runs a church service and talks about how sin pollutes the soul. Nancy feels good repenting for all she has done wrong. That night, Lew and Nancy sit on the boathouse. Lew goes running with the dogs and Nancy stays sitting where he left her. When she gets away from the dogs, which have jumped on her, she falls into his arms and they kiss each other. For the first time, she feels like she really loves someone.

On the 11th, Nancy feels sick again despite wanted to spend time outside. When she finally gets up, she spends the day with Lew and they exchange kisses all day on the canoe. They have a romantic exchange of a Nancy's ring and Lew's great-grandmother's locket. Nancy looks forward to a bright future with Lew. On the 13th, Nancy is sick again.



July

July Summary and Analysis

No entries are produced for the next three weeks. On July 5th, Nancy reports that she has been very busy, happy, and tired. The gaggle is always together. Lew and Nancy get mad because they do not have more time alone, although Nancy is happy because two girls at school have gotten pregnant. Lew and Nancy have come close to having sex but then they promise each other that they will wait at least until they are seventeen. Nancy quits the band because she is so tired.

Two weeks later Nancy has a nagging feeling that she has a serious disease because the medicine is not helping and she has little stress. On the 21st, Nancy goes with her friends to the water slides but is too tired to join them. On the 25th, Nancy's mother takes her to the doctor. The next day Lew comes over while Nancy's mother is gone, leaving them alone. They study but then they got so involved that they almost have sex. Lew is mad at both of them. Then Lew runs to church and makes them promise to God that they will not have sex. Then Lew says that they will not see each other for three weeks to let things calm down.

July 28th comes and Lew sends her a long and sweet letter. It says that when his parents divorced, Lew vowed that he would not have sex until he got married because his parents broke up over it. He then said that if she wanted to dump him, he would understand, particularly if waiting until marriage was not for her. Nancy is proud of Lew and starts counting down the day. On the 29th, Lew smiles when he sees her but they have to have self-discipline. Nancy loves Lew so much and really wants to be worthy of him.

August

August Summary and Analysis

The first day of August finds Nancy with an inflammation in her chest that is causing her to spit up phlegm. On the 5th she is still sick and trying to do everything she can to get well. On the 7th she is missing everything. On the 11th, Nancy is feeling a lot better and is glad that her immune system is happy. She is happy and is impressed that Lew is an A student and Student Body President. Knowing Lew has changed her life.

By the 16th, it has been three weeks since she first got sick. Nancy is very excited to see Lew and it is everything Nancy hopes that it can be. They are both a bit embarrassed. Lew invites her over for barbecue with his family. That Saturday they have a wonderful day with Lew's family. On Sunday Nancy wakes up terrible sick and she really does not want to miss more school. She is able to go to school on the 20th, although just barely. By the 21st, she is feeling well again and the gaggle has a party. However on the 23rd, when she goes to see the doctor, Dr. Talbert immediately sends her to the hospital for pneumonia. For the next two days she takes many tests but Lew comes to see her. On the 26th, Nancy's mother suggests that she might go to Arizona with her father to help her lungs but Nancy does not want to leave Lew. The night of Monday, the 27th, she is finally able to go home.

That night however, she finds out something terrible. Dr. Talbert informs Nancy that she has HIV. She knows she is not stupid and cannot figure out how she got it, having only had sex once and never having a blood transfusion or using dirty needles. Then Nancy and her mother realize that the virus came from her rape and Nancy is so thankful that she and Lew did not have sex. Nancy realizes early in the morning that she is going to die and be separated from Lew.

On the 28th, Nancy starts seeing a counselor, Missy, who teaches her about AIDS. On the 29th, Nancy decides to stay with her dad to get herself together. Both Missy and Nancy's mother want her to report Collin to the police. Nancy resists at first but the thought of Margie having AIDS is terrible. On the 30th, Nancy notes that stopping Collin has given her life a sense of purpose. Janie Dee, the police lady, helps her feel important. Nancy is determined to help the police create the most detailed drawing she can. On the 31st, Nancy gives Officer Williams all the information she could, almost producing a colored photograph.

September

September Summary and Analysis

Nancy does not want to die. She wanted children and grandchildren. She wanted to have them with Lew. She is not even sure if she will graduate from high school. On the 4th of September, Officer Williams returns to ask Nancy about Collin's car and Nancy tells him that Collin had gone to an Abraham Lincoln Junior High. He will collect the yearbooks and try to recognize Collin. Missy has started visiting Nancy every day and encourages her to get on with her life. Nancy starts feeling better.

On the 10th, Nancy keeps receiving letters from the gaggle about Arizona, despite the fact that she never went. She realizes that friends are so sacred. Nancy eats with El and Red at the mall and they have a great time. Nancy misses being a child. Dorie now has a secret boyfriend. Nancy decides not to tell the gaggle about her AIDS and she cannot believe how deadly her blood is. On the night of the 16th, Nancy wakes up and is determined to tell Lew what happened.

On the 21st Nancy notes that Dorie is starting to change now that she is dating Freddy Simmons. The next day the gaggle and Lew go to a party at Jamie's and have fun. Lew and Nancy are able to spend the afternoon of the 24th together. The 27th is Nancy's mother's birthday. Lew and Nancy go to a classical music concert that night and have a great time.

January

January Summary and Analysis

Nancy loses her diary and does not write for three months. So many fun things happen during this period. She notes that her father must be really sad missing these times with her. After Christmas, Nancy goes to her father's for awhile. She connects with him and feels awful for being separated from him. Most of the time however Nancy is bored. She does start to feel better though. Nancy then recounts some activities she shares with her father.

On the 22nd, Nancy is back home. She is glad to be home, although she misses her father. Dorie has been messing around with Fred Simmons and thinks that she is pregnant. She is wondering whether to have an abortion and whether to marry Fred. Lew encourages the gaggle to be supportive.

Later in the day, Officer Williams comes over with boxes full of yearbooks. After hours of searching, Nancy finds Collin's picture. He is actually twenty-four years old and his name is Gary Mitchem. Nancy just wants to cry. On the 23rd she cannot sleep again, as her thoughts race. She cannot stop having memories of "Collin" or Gary. On the 24th, Nancy vows to her diary that she will never think of Collin again. She is in so much pain and cannot stand to go to school or to stay home. Nancy desperately wants to tell Collin but she cannot. She knows that she will disintegrate.

February

February Summary and Analysis

Officer Williams and Nancy's mother meet her after school on February 5th. They are about to put out another APB on Collin and want her to try and remember if she has seen him with other kids. Nancy immediately mentions Margie. Missy helps Nancy relax so that she can think. She also remembers seeing Collin with a bunch of kids from another school. Nancy just wants to be left alone by the whole incident. A few days later, Nancy is concerned about her illness and wants to learn more about it.

By the 9th, Nancy is back in the hospital with pneumocystis pneumonia. Dr. Talbert cannot treat her any more due to her HIV, so she now sees Dr. Sheranian. Nancy must endure more tests. While Nancy is in the hospital, she has her mother tell the gaggle she is in Arizona again. Nancy is still in the hospital on Valentine's Day and studies about AIDS. She repeats some of the standard information about it that she is learning about for the first time. Nancy does not want to die at the age of fifteen. On the 15th she laments that she will never be able to make love to Lew. She later finds out that with protection, she might be able to.

By the end of the weekend, Dr. Sheranian tells Nancy that she can go home. She has been reading his book steadily about people with her disease. AIDS is not unbearable and it is not casually contagious. She is going to tell everyone though she gets worried as she leaves the hospital about what is included in "body fluids."

On the 20th, Wednesday, Dorie, El and Red come over right after school. Everything is going well except that Dorie has not had her period. Dorie says she has to decide whether to have an abortion and Nancy cannot even imagine doing such a thing. A week later, Dorie visits again and Fred dumped her. He acted like her pregnancy meant nothing.

March

March Summary and Analysis

Dorie comes to sleep over on March 2nd and they talk about whether Dorie used protection. On Monday, Nancy spends a nice day with Dorie and her mother. On the 5th, Lew and Nancy see each other again. Lew kisses her and she really wants to have sex with him. She thinks it will be beautiful and wholesome with Lew. A few days later, Dr. Sheranian tells Nancy that because she already has a weak immune system, she will progress to AIDS faster than usual. She has an eye infection and the medicine that cures it conflicts with her AZT, the medicine that slows the progress of AIDS so she must choose. A third option is having doctors implant small sustained-release pellets in the eyeball to keep the drug out of the bloodstream. If her eye is not treated, she will go blind and she cannot handle that. She will not be able to see Lew.

A week and a half passes and Nancy notes that Dorie is starting to be teased because she is showing. On the 23rd, Nancy's mother takes the gaggle out to the park. On the 25th, Nancy is sick again and her HIV is moving fast. Now she has a kidney infection. Nancy starts thinking about death and really wants to go to heaven and see God and eventually see her mother, father, and Lew. Nancy is back in school on the 27th and goes on a field trip with the gaggle to see Lew's tennis team play. Lew holds Nancy's hand for awhile after. When Nancy, Dorie, Red, and Lew are alone, Nancy tells them about AIDS. They cry together. Nancy does not tell them how she got it, letting them think she got it from blood transfusions.

On the 29th, Good Friday, during the first class, the word leaks out about Nancy's AIDS. No one knows how to act. Everyone whispers when she walks by. The gaggle and Nancy have lunch together and they offer to defend her but she just wants time.



April and May

April and May Summary and Analysis

By April 3rd, things are nearly back to normal. Nurse Maggleby explains things to everyone. Nancy is glad that everyone knows. The next week passes by with only minor events. On the 10th, Nancy is ridiculed for her AIDS the first time. Immediately the principal calls Nancy's mother to pick her up and she does not want to go back. That night the boys who make fun of her are suspended indefinitely. Their parents give them a curfew and Nancy agrees to go back to school. On Friday everyone is really nice to her and she wonders if they would be so nice if they knew what happened.

Nancy is very busy over the next two weeks due to school work. Red, El, and Dorie have been trying to get as much "life" into their lives as they can with her. Dorie will have a baby soon and Nancy will be dead.

On May 7th, El has a birthday party for Nancy and invites twenty kids for a barbecue, movie, and volleyball. Everyone is excited about coming. It is going to be a great party and they are renting a bus for everyone. Lew and Nancy will get to sit in the backseat together. Thursday and Friday morning pass slowly because Nancy is so excited to turn sixteen.

The party starts out well. Lew is waiting for her. Everyone yells 'Happy Birthday' and throws confetti. Nancy feels like a princess. They are having a blast and the barbecue is fun. The movie is fun and Lew kisses her on the cheek and ear several times. During the movie, Nancy has trouble controlling her bladder and pees on herself. Nancy runs out into the trash can area outside the theater and creeps behind it and pees. She hears some kids while she hides. She then hears rats and she vomits. Nancy catches a cab because of how nasty she feels and has the cab take her home. Nancy has her mother come home and she calls El. Nancy showers and she cries her tears out. In the next entry, however, Lew has called and is dear and caring. No one knows about the accident, luckily.

On the 13th, Nancy goes to the doctor and they give her adult diapers. Dorie calls her in the afternoon and wants to see her immediately. Nancy then admits to her journal that she has been wetting the bed for weeks but cannot admit it. In the late afternoon, Dorie bursts into Nancy's house. Apparently Delta has realized that Nancy peed on herself and everyone starts whispering about it. Nancy is incredibly embarrassed and does not leave her room for three days. An unknown number of days later it turns out that Nancy has not been eating and she may have to go to the hospital. Later she reports that her mother is taking her to Arizona to stay with her dad and she does not want to go. She will not talk to anyone on the phone.

On Sunday, Nancy is in Phoenix with her mother and on Wednesday Nancy is alone with her dad. Nancy now has to eat every two hours. By the 29th, Nancy is feeling much

better. She likes her father's boyfriend. By the 31st she likes Liz so much she feels unfaithful to her mother.



June, July and August

June, July and August Summary and Analysis

On June 3rd, Liz calls to invite her to come to her office to meet the office manager. As she entered in the office on the 4th, she is nervous. It turns out however that she will be employed as an intern. On the 27th, Liz has been working for twenty-two "glorious" days. Summer is coming to an end and Nancy must decide where she will go to school.

It is July 2nd, and Nancy has lunch with Adam, the mailroom boy, again. He is in high school and wants to be a dentist. He is serious and reserved. Adam is like Kyle, Lew's brother. On the 12th, Nancy learns that Adam has his own car. They eat together Dutch-style. Nancy is glad to have a friend.

On August 5th, Nancy thinks she is getting better. She can work all day at the office and she hangs out with Adam and has a good time. Nancy, Adam, and his father have started play wind instruments together. Early in the morning, Nancy starts to feel as if her mother, the gaggle, and Lew are not real. She cannot read the letters her friends and Lew send. On the 9th, the wind instrument players are calling themselves the Almost All Red Aborigines. Adam's mom play the bass guitar. Dad and Liz and some others came over to hear them play. By the 19th, they have two paid gigs. Some people sing with them.

On the 23rd, Nancy walks into her room and El is right there, on her bed. Nancy is incredibly happy and finally decides to let Lew and her friends back in. Dorie has her baby girl on August 22nd and gives it up for adoption to a couple in California. Lew keeps working with his uncle in Raleigh and wears Nancy's ring on a chain around his neck. El says her mother seems very sad. El has to leave on the 25th and Nancy misses her.

On the 27th, Adam and Nancy go to the mall, had pizza and watch a movie. Nancy loves him but he cannot replace the gaggle. Sometimes they hold hands but it does not make her feel like Lew. Nancy wonders whether being with Lew was best for either one of them. By the early morning, Nancy is desperate to go home. After arranging a replacement for her at Liz's office, Nancy's father calls her mother to tell her that she is coming home. Arizona classes start Tuesday so Nancy will go for a few days. On September 1st, Nancy and her dad go to Mass, which gives her some courage.



September through February

September through February Summary and Analysis

In her September 6th entry, Nancy reports that she hates school in Arizona. No one sees her and she feels desperately lonely. At lunch, she just wants to scream that she has AIDS. Nancy has known the gaggle since kindergarten and has always belonged. The next few days Nancy is just exhausted and depressed that she cannot go home. She is getting grumpier and kids being nicer at school do not help. On the 11th, Nancy goes to the airport even though she is in a lot of pain. She is too sick to endure the flight and so her father takes her to see Dr. Marx, a young, black doctor that Dr. Sheranian recommends. Nancy studies at home until September 21st and is not sure that she can wait long. She is happy to be home.

The next entry skips all the way to Halloween, October 31st. Nancy has been busying catching up with school and with her social life. Everyone is nurturing her. Lew has a party that night and it is a lot of fun. Lew drives her home and it is romantic. In November Nancy resents spending so much time sleeping when life is so good. She resents that Lew is so active that he does not have much time for her despite being so wonderful.

Nancy skips ahead to November 22nd. She takes piano and flute again, along with studying at home and being considerate of her mom. On Thanksgiving, Nancy's dad flies home to have Thanksgiving with Nancy's mom and her. Nancy is happy to have them together and that she gets to job. On December 1st, Nancy and her mother take her father to the airport and they all cry to be split up again. Nancy's father invites them out to Phoenix for Christmas and they are happy to agree.

On December 21st, Nancy reports that Lew hurt himself skiing and is now in traction. She hates that she cannot do anything for him. Time passes all the way to January 4th. Nancy has been in Heaven since Lew broke his right leg because Nancy can now drive him to and from school. She is full-time Lew-sitter. She is happy to be needed. Nancy hates to leave for Christmas because she is away from Lew but she still has fun. Lew's left leg is okay but Nancy is sad she is not needed as much.

It is January 5th and life is good except that no one can find Collin. Nancy cannot handle talking to the police again. On January 14th Nancy is starting to run down again. By the 15th, she is depressed and life has slowed down. On the 17th sleep is the only thing that helps her escape depression. Nancy has stopped eating entirely. Eventually her mother forces her into Dr. Sheranian's clinic and has to stay in the AIDS ward. Nancy made her mother call her friends and tell them she has gone to her dad's. On the 21st, Nancy convinces her mom to let her go to her dad's and by the 27th, in Phoenix, she is feeling better.



By February 3rd, Adam comes over every day for music lessons. Adam has been writing good songs. The gaggle sends lots of letters and cards. Nancy cannot tell them about Adam because Lew might get jealous. Nancy feels like her life is upside down. On the 4th, Dr. Marx says she is fine and on the 5th, she realizes Adam likes her. On the 8th, Nancy is bleeding, although not like with her period, so she calls Dr. Marx. It turns out Nancy has a rectal ulcer that is AIDS-related. She has to wear Depends diapers all the time now. On the 10th, Dr. Marx tells Nancy and her father that she will need to stay in Phoenix in case the bleeding suddenly got worse. Nancy cannot stand it. She goes crazy and needs tranquilizers. She hears Liz and her father fighting and thinks that it is because of her.

Dr. Marx sends a nurse over on February 11th that instructs Maria, the maid, how to wash Nancy's linens. She assures Maria that she cannot get AIDS if she is careful but Maria quickly quits. After two weeks, Nancy's father still has not found another maid. No Mexican maids will work for them. Each day things get dirtier because no one will help them. On the 27th, white mossy stuff starts to grow in Nancy's mouth. Adam calls that afternoon.

On the 28th, Nancy's mother flies in and insists that she go back with her. They both agree that she cannot stay in Phoenix or go home and so they decide to send Nancy to her Aunt Thelma in Idaho on their ranch. Aunt Thelma agrees to have her at least for a few weeks. No one there minds that she has AIDS. Dr. Marx instructs her on how to avoid infecting her family. Nancy's father cries hysterically in front of her that night.



March, April and Epilogue

March, April and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

March 3rd finds Nancy at Aunt Thelma's. She is happy to find her diary, her "only gaggle." Nancy's mother is with her and they squeeze together in a small plane with Nancy's aunt and uncle to make their way to the ranch. The ranch is beautiful and very quiet. Nancy's mother can only stay three days and so Nancy is left with her Aunt and Uncle. She quickly makes friends with Aunt Thelma's cat, Cougar. Nancy's Uncle Melvin digs a ditch for her diapers and fences it in so the animals cannot get to it. She spends time with their dog, Red Alert, when she is alone. Nancy feels close to nature and to God, loving her quiet time on the ranch. She goes to a little church with a service very different from Catholics. It is friendly and old-fashioned.

On March 11th, Nancy writes that Melvin plays guitar and sings country church songs for her. Cougar and Red Alert are fun animals and Aunt Thelma thanks God for basically everything. Thelma, Melvin, and Nancy take off on their horses, Sonny and Cher, to travel across the ranch. They stop and then Thelma and Melvin set up easels so that they can paint together. Apparently Nancy has been painting awhile since she has been out there and her painting is much better than her original. Melvin makes frames for both paintings so Nancy can compare. Melvin also starts to teach her guitar and to write her own songs.

On the 15th, Nancy's mom and dad come to visit and she gets a bunch of letters from the gaggle and Adam. She is both upset and glad they do not call. Nancy misses everyone terribly. The next day a bronchial problem flares up and by Wednesday, the 18th, Nancy has a terrible case of the flu. Thelma and Melvin are worried when they see that Nancy has no energy. On the 19th, Nancy calls Dr. Sheranian and he comforts her and tells her that her symptoms are not life-threatening. On March 20th, the first day of real spring comes. On the 22nd, Nancy cannot make it to church so they have church at home. Melvin plays the mandolin and Thelma talks about loving God and our neighbor. It is a great church service.

On "Black Monday," Red Alert is nowhere to be found. Nancy, Melvin and Thelma search for him. When they found him, he has died peacefully. Thelma assured Nancy that he has had a wonderful life. They then build Red Alert a coffin and they have a great funeral. A few days later, they bring home a puppy that is Red Alert's great-grandson. They name him RA4 or Red Alert, the 4th. That night, Nancy has a nightmare about dying. They bring the dog home on the 24th but the dog has to be muzzled because he is part-wolf.

On the 25th, Nancy writes that she is spending her days quietly, often on the porch watching the sun. Nancy cannot bear to think about her friends or family. That afternoon, Nancy's mom and dad arrive with El. Nancy is very happy. El brings blowup



pictures of the gaggle that are the size of posters. They also put a life-sized poster of Lew on the ceiling. He is going to come up there when school gets out.

Nancy's mother and father and El leave at noon on March 29th. Nancy is hurt so much she can hardly breathe. That same day, RA4 warms up to her. For the next few days, time stops "dead in its tracks." April 7th is a wonderful day. Dr. B, a female doctor, flies in on a helicopter to see her. Dr. B is there to answer all of her questions about AIDS. Dr. B also tells her about how she might write a book. Nancy and Dr. B connect immediately and Nancy is eager to use her diary to create a book that can help other kids with AIDS. Dr. B and Nancy talk throughout the day. Dr. B has worked with many troubled kids. The next day, Melvin and Thelma are going to take Nancy and Dr. B on a carriage ride to some of Nancy's favorite places.

Nancy feels pretty good on April 10th although she notices that her hair is becoming stringy. She is determined to press on and work on her book. That day is wonderful though. Dr. B spends the evening going over her notes and tapes. They talk about death for awhile. Dr. B and Thelma believe that when Nancy dies her soul will travel to Heaven or "home" as Thelma calls it. RA4 has become a constant companion.

In the epilogue, the editor notes that Nancy dies in her sleep on April 12th, two days after she makes her last entry. She is buried on the ranch right by Red Alert's grave. Melvin carves "There will never be another Nancy" on her grave.



Characters

Nancy

Nancy, an alias for the anonymous author of *It Happened to Nancy*, is the main character of the book. The book is composed directly from her diary entries. The editor, Beatrice Sparks, deliberately shields us from information about Nancy's real life, for instance hiding the South Carolina town's name from us along with any information about her address. When the story begins, Nancy is fourteen and falls deeply in love with a boy named Collin, who she thinks is eighteen. He works his way into her heart and then rapes her on a date in her own house. It later turns out that Nancy contracted the HIV virus from Collin during the only act of sexual intercourse she ever performed.

Nancy is a happy and intelligent young girl. She possesses a great deal of verbal talent with a strong ability to express herself and difficult emotions at times of emotional trauma. Nancy, unlike many teenagers who have been raped, discusses what happened to her and directly confronts her feelings when she is able to do so. Despite the rape, Nancy is still full of the dreams of a typical fourteen-year-old girl who wants to finish school, go to college, maintain close friendships, marry a good man and have children.

Nancy also cares enormously for her friends and family. She is always talking about her activities with "the gaggle" or a group comprised of Nancy, Red, El, and Dorie. She is also madly in love with Lew, her kind and honorable boyfriend who refuses to take advantage of her.

Collin

Collin is the villain of *It Happened to Nancy*. The diary begins with Nancy attending a Garth Brooks Concert. She finds herself alone during an asthma attack and Collin finds her and helps her to recover, eventually taking her back to her parents. However, Collin seems older and more mature, so Nancy takes an interest in him. When Collin reciprocates, Nancy is overwhelmed with the happiness that a fourteen-year-old girl feels falling in love for the first time experineces. Collin changes everything in Nancy's life for the better.

Nancy keeps her relationship with Collin an absolute secret, not even telling her friends. She knows they would not approve because Collin is four years older than she was. Collin often call sher on the phone and they eventually start skipping school to spend time together. But one night, Collin comes over to her house with wine coolers and mixes a drug into her drink. He then takes Nancy to her mother's bed and rapes her. He quickly leaves the house and never speaks to her again.

Nancy is devastated but does her best to get over how she feels until she sees Collin with Margie, a younger girl who Collin is clearly intent on victimizing. She becomes



frightened for Margie but does not know what to do, so she eventually lets her worries pass. When she discovers that she has HIV, Nancy is again overwhelmed with pain and guilt. She worries about Collin hurting other girls and does everything in her power to help the police track Collin down. While he is never found, the police discover that Collin's real name is Gary Mitchem and that he is not eighteen but actually twenty-four years old.

Nancy's Mother

Nancy's mother appears in the book as a somewhat distant character from Nancy due to how much she works to support their family. Her lack of attention partly contributes to allowing Collin and Nancy to be alone together. When Nancy tells her mother about her rape, she reorients her life more towards Nancy. When they discover Nancy has HIV, her mother becomes a source of constant love and support, even putting aside her differences with her ex-husband, Nancy's father, to help Nancy.

Nancy's Father

Nancy's father and mother are divorced. Her father lives in Phoenix where he is constantly busy with his business. For much of the book, Nancy's father is simply not a concern of Nancy's but when she becomes ill, her family thinks that the Arizona climate might be better for her health. She spends time there, on and off, until she goes into hospice care in Idaho. Nancy's father is also a constant source of kindness and support, despite having to work as hard as he does.

Lew

Lew is Nancy's boyfriend throughout almost the entire book. He is incredibly kind to Nancy. Religious, Lew is serious about not having sex until he and Nancy are either married or at least old enough to make a more serious commitment and makes them swear in a church to be faithful to one another. This is only one example of the respect that Lew treats Nancy with. He is always kind to her and thoughtful, and almost too good to be true after Collin. Nancy writes about him in glowing terms constantly.

Dorie

One of the girls in "the gaggle," Dorie is one of Nancy's closest friends. Dorie gets pregnant with her boyfriend Fred who then decides that he will take no part in the baby's life. Dorie struggles with teen pregnancy and bonds with Nancy over their struggles. She has to consider whether to have an abortion but decided to have her baby and give it up for adoption.



EI

Another member of "the gaggle," EI makes an effort to fly out both to Phoenix and to Idaho to see Nancy while she is sick.

Red

This individual is the third member of "the gaggle" other than Nancy.

Self

Nancy also writes to "self" in her diary.

Margie

This individual is a young girl in grade school who appears to be Collin's next victim.

Missy

This individual is the social worker and counselor that helped Nancy through her rape trauma.

Officer Williams

This individual is the policeman in charge of hunting down Collin. This person is a great help to Nancy despite Nancy not wanting to talk about Collin.

Dr. Talbert

This individual is Nancy's first doctor who refers her to Dr. Sheranian when he finds out that she has HIV.

Dr. Sheranian

This individual is an HIV expert. Dr. Sheranian does everything he can for Nancy, but in the end, in the early 90s HIV could not be stopped.

Dr. Marx

This individual is a friend of Dr. Sheranian's in Phoenix. Dr. Marx is Nancy's physician when she stays with her father.



Adam

This individual is an older boy who becomes a close friend of Nancy's when she meets him at work. Although she never develops feelings for Adam, they are a source of mutual support for one another.

Melvin and Thelma

These individuals are Nancy's aunt and uncle who live on a remote ranch in Idaho. They agree to allow Nancy to stay with them in what is effectively hospice care.

Pets

Nancy has a number of pets that comfort her throughout her fight with HIV/AIDS. They include a bird named Imperical, a cat named Cougar, and two dogs, Red Alert and RA4.

Dr. B

Beatrice Sparks, the editor of the book, who flies out to Nancy's ranch to help her put together her story before she dies.



Objects/Places

Nancy's Town, South Carolina

Nancy's hometown is not named but she clearly lives in a fairly normal American suburb in the south.

Nancy's House

Most of the major events in the book happen at or near Nancy's house. She is raped in her home, makes most of her diary entries in her home, and spends most of her time when she is sick at home.

Nancy's High School

Nancy is happy and well-liked at her high school with several close friends and a popular boyfriend. When her school finds out she has AIDS, they are initially afraid of her but the school nurse talks them down and they are kind to her. However, a few boys do make fun of her one day. They are quickly suspended.

The Garth Brooks Concert

This is the concert where Collin and Nancy met.

Lew's House

Lew has a large extended family and a home where he often entertains company. Nancy has a lot of fun there.

Phoenix, Nancy's Dad's House

Nancy's father lives in Phoenix and has Nancy stay at his house when she is there. Nancy finds it lonely because her father works so often.

The Hospital

Nancy spends a lot of time in hospitals sick with illnesses that most people's immune systems fight off with ease.



Thelma and Melvin's Ranch

This is the Idaho ranch where Nancy goes to die.

HIV/AIDS

Nancy contracts HIV/AIDS when she is raped by Collin.

Rape

Date-rape is a major theme of *It Happened to Nancy* since it is the event around which the entire book is organized.

Nancy's Ring/Lew's Bracelet

Lew and Nancy exchange jewelry as expressions of love for one another.

Nancy's Diary

Nearly the entire book is composed from entries in Nancy's diary.

Depends and Accidents

As Nancy's HIV progresses, she acquires a disease that causes her to lose bladder control, so she has to wear adult diapers or Depends. At her birthday party in a movie theater, she wets herself and feels humiliated.

Love and Romance

Love and romance are a big part of Nancy's life. They lead her to trust Collin but they also lead her to Lew.

Sex

Nancy's first sexual experience is terrible but she enjoys her sexual experiences with Lew and wants to have actual sex with him before she finds out that she has HIV.

Sin and Religion

Nancy is a Roman Catholic who is fairly serious about her faith. Her Christian faith is a great source of comfort to her, although she at first worries about whether she sinned

with Collin until a nun convinces her otherwise. She and Lew are also committed to staying abstinent until they are married.



Themes

The Destruction of Childhood

Nancy's childhood is destroyed by two events in her young, teenage life. They are rape and her discovery that she contracted AIDS as the result of her rape. It is clear from Nancy's diary entries that she is naturally happy, creative, excited, thoughtful, and hopeful about the future. She has ambitions, dreams, loves, and is deeply connected to her family, friends, and boyfriend. Her rape makes her feel like someone has stolen her soul. Whenever she thinks about it, she feels dirty and worthless.

The rape shatters her self-esteem though perhaps not to the extent that one might expect. Nancy does not exactly "bounce back" but she does try to put the rape behind her and works through her emotional trauma in counseling. She despises Collin and wants to stop him from hurting other people but she tries not to think about him and even at one point vows not to think of him again.

Nancy's innocence has been destroyed. She has her first sexual experience and it is terrible. She now knows, more directly than any girl should have to know, how evil some people can be. She has the weight of keeping her rape a secret and has to face what is, at best, an adult issue as a child. Finding out she has HIV made things a thousand times worse. Now she knows she is going to die before she reaches adulthood. Her dreams are gone and she has to do the best she could to psychologically endure her illness. She often complains about how she has to worry about so many adult things and how she cannot have a real teenager's life due to her illness and her experiences.

Resilience

One of the most unusual things about Nancy is how resilient she is in the face of being raped, finding out she has HIV/AIDS, and living with the knowledge that death is on the way. Nancy is clearly devastated by her rape. While perhaps she keeps a lot out of her diary and has the usual sense of worthlessness and dirtiness, she is able to bounce back and have a fairly normal life, except for her bouts of asthma.

Particularly unusual is her healthy sexual desire for Lew where she does not have any sense of dirtiness about sex associated with sex itself as most victims of rape do. In fact, with knowledge of basic trauma psychology, the reader might wonder indeed whether Beatrice Sparks either omitted information from Nancy's diary or made it all up.

Nancy is also surprisingly resilient when she discovers she has HIV/AIDS. The reader may be surprised at this evaluation given how often Nancy talks about how she does not want to die, how often she talks about wanting to die, losing her dreams, feeling pain for her family, and so on. Social scientists know that grief proceeds in four systematic stages even when applied to one's own death. Nancy seems to have no period of denial whatsoever, which is the first stage of grief. While Nancy often breaks



down into tears, she is still able to handle her emotional life with reasonable facility, which demonstrates, again, either incredible resilience or the imagination of Beatrice Sparks.

The Unfairness of Life

Nancy is an innocent fourteen-year-old girl at the beginning of the book. While somewhat responsible for her actions such as being along with Collin in her house, she is totally blameless for her rape. She is unfortunate to have been date-raped by a twenty-four-year-old man masquerading as an eighteen-year-old freshman in college. This brutal crime is something that no one should have to endure.

The theme of life's unfairness is not raised by the sadly common experience of date-rape. Instead, the shocking issue of unfairness arises with respect to the fact that Nancy contracted HIV/AIDS from the date-rape. So she is not only unlucky enough to be date-raped but also contracts a deadly sexually transmitted disease the only time in her entire life that she has sex.

Nancy is not involved with drugs, sex in dangerous places, or anything of the kind. Instead, she contracts HIV/AIDS in such an improbable fashion that the unfairness of life seems to stick out to all of her friends and family. Her father breaks down in the book because he cannot understand the meaning of Nancy getting AIDS. When Lew first hears that Nancy has AIDS, he has precisely the same reaction. How can it be fair, from the point of view of the universe, for a good, kind, and innocent girl with a bright future to not only be date-raped by a sexual predator but to contract HIV/AIDS at the same time?



Style

Perspective

It Happened to Nancy has two perspectives and the degree to which one perspective dominates the other is ultimately determined by whether It Happened to Nancy is in fact a genuine work of non-fiction or not.

Assuming the book is a true account of a young girl's struggle with AIDS, the primary perspective of the book is Nancy's. Nancy is a fourteen-year-old girl from a divorced and middle-class family in a suburban town in South Carolina in the early 1990s. The book covers two years of her life. She has what one might regard as the stereotypical "good life" for someone in her time and place despite her parents' divorce and her asthma. Nancy is clearly bright, particularly with respect to her verbal abilities. Her diary is full of verbal expression even about the darkest moments in her young life.

Nancy is a committed Roman Catholic and her perspective often influences her life with respect to sex and sin as well as being kind and loving to others. Nancy has a positive attitude about death despite being afraid of it. She even partly looks forward to death because her suffering will end. Otherwise Nancy's perspective is what one would expect of someone from her time and place. She dreams of going to college, marrying a good man like her high school boyfriend, Lew, and living out a long and happy life. She likes spending time with friends, playing in the high school band, and going to G-rated parties.

However, if Beatrice Sparks fabricates Nancy's story in order to write a book that would reach out to teenagers with HIV/AIDS, the perspective of the book might make more sense. First, Nancy seems unusually resilient in the face of being raped and contracting AIDS. Despite suffering, she does not follow the standard stages of grief and appears sexually unaffected with respect to Lew from being raped, which is highly unusual. Further, the book seems to contain several important errors, such as the fact that she gets sick a week or two following her rape which is highly unusual after contracting HIV at least for the quick recovery time she experienced. Her HIV test comes back too quickly to have been administered in 1992 as well.

Tone

The tone of It Happened to Nancy has a strikingly bipolar element in that it ranges sharply between happy, bright, and hopeful and dark, fearful, and depressed. Nancy is naturally a smart, active, social, and loving teenager. A significant portion of the tone of the book is expressed when Nancy talks about how happy she is with "the gaggle" and all the fun they have together. She constantly expresses love for either Collin, as in the beginning of the book, or Lew, for the rest of the book.



The tone lightens whenever Nancy is able to spend time with her family, her friends, or has a romantic outing. The text comes alive and often moves into all caps and exclamation marks, indicating her deep sense of happiness.

Conversely, the tone becomes negative in a number of distinct ways depending on the particularly difficult Nancy is facing. After Collin rapes her, Nancy's tone becomes dull and listless. At first she blames herself and so the tone becomes depressed and dark. Later, as she recovers the tone becomes angry and expresses hurt. When Nancy finds out she has HIV she expresses fear and concern for her family, she often expresses in her tone a sense of pain at how much her family must hurt due to her illness. In other cases, Nancy's physical illnesses will fill the tone with a sense of fatigue, pain, despair, and hopelessness.

Structure

It Happened to Nancy is almost exclusively a series of entries in Nancy's diaries. They all occur in direct chronological order and so the book's structure contains no foreshadowing. The outcome is certain from the time that the reader learns that Nancy has HIV/AIDS. The book likely begins in 1992. The first entry is on April 14th of that year the night that Nancy goes to the Garth Brooks concert where she runs into Collin. Her relationship with Collin builds and builds until the fateful night when he rapes her.

After the rape, Nancy undergoes an extended period of psychological suffering and grief and while she recovers somewhat for a time, this is again shattered once she discovers that she has HIV/AIDS. The structure is not composed of regular entries. At stressful times, Nancy will write regularly but when things go well she will get so busy with her full life that she may not write for a few weeks or even a few months. However, there are almost no several month gaps between April 1992 and April 1994 when Nancy dies.

Diary entries usually describe some event or set of events and almost always explain Nancy's emotional states during that time. Entries rarely contain events without emotional descriptions. On some stressful days, Nancy makes entries throughout the days, just as she does during particularly exciting days, like her 16th birthday or the first time she sees Lew after their three week hiatus.

It Happened to Nancy is not all diary entries however. At the end of the book it contains helpful frequently asked questions about HIV/AIDS and rape.



Quotes

"Collin and I talked like we had known each other forever, and I, who have always felt uneasy with boys, felt completely comfortable and comforted" (April, pg. 6.)

"Dear Collin. You are my dearest confidant, my valiant hero, my trusted friend, my future! Literally my happy, happy, forever future" (April, pg. 12.)

"I even bit him...but he...raped me-NO, NO, he didn't." (April, pg. 24.)

"I'm just an empty box of loneliness" (April, pg. 27.)

"Margie is two years younger than I am and only in seventh grade, just one year out of grade school...she's a baby. Surely Collin wouldn't...but something deep, deep inside tells me he would" (May, pg. 45.)

"Parents don't seem to realize that when they divorced each other, they divorce their kids too" (June, pg. 54.)

"The Beginning of a Future that is Going to be More Glorious than has ever been Known by Mankind since the Beginning of the Earth ...as well as all the Other Creations of Infinity" (June, pg. 60.)

"We won't see each other for three weeks" (July, pg. 65.)

"I have...the HIV virus" (August, pg. 75.)

"At last, when I was about to give up, I found his picture-but he wasn't just barely eighteen like he'd said, he was twenty-four-years old. Gary Mitchem" (January, pg. 100.)

Eventually any illness you're susceptible to can lead to your death" (February, pg. 110.)

"Dr. S doesn't even call it HIV anymore; he calls it AIDS" (March, pg. 126.)

"We all cried together, and Lew kept holding my hand tighter and tighter and tighter and repeating over and over, 'Why you?...Why you?...Why you'" (March, pg. 128.)

"I want to be JUST ME, not the girl with AIDS" (April, pg. 134.)

"Take care of yourself, my little Nancy, because you are sacredly precious to me" (May, pg. 146.)

"Everyone, including me, will be so much better off when I finally die" (February, pg. 181.)

"It's my belief and Lew's that God comes wherever love is." (March, 194)



"Nancy, I shall love you through all time and infinity, and I'm coming up as soon as school is out" (March, pg. 211.)

"Maybe I can do something in some way to help other kids who are in my situation" (April, pg. 213.)

"There will never be another Nancy" (April, pg. 218.)



Topics for Discussion

How does Collin seduce Nancy? Is this his intention all along?

How does Nancy's rape make her feel? Explain in detail and discuss some of the emotions she feels that surprise you.

What role does Lew play in Nancy's life? How does he counterbalance Collin?

How well do you think Nancy handles being raped or finding out she has HIV? Coping with AIDS and death?

What role does religion play in Nancy's life?

Why does Nancy often withdraw from her friends and family?

What role do pets play in Nancy's life?

Do you think It Happened to Nancy is a true story? Why or why not? Explain in detail. Give at least two arguments for your conclusion.