

# **The Interestings Study Guide**

## **The Interestings**

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## Plot Summary

Overcoming one's demons is the major theme of the novel *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer. The story follows a group of six friends who meet at a summer arts camp. As they find their places in life, the six deal with their downfalls, prejudices, fears, and insecurities. Main character Jules Jacobson-Boyd learns that even with the sadness that each person faces, life is interesting enough to keep them going.

The novel touches on a myriad of issues that are relevant in today's world. For example, mental illness is a topic when Dennis Boyd, one of the characters, experiences a nervous breakdown. His experience relates the reality of depression and its ability to disable a person if it is left untreated. On another topic, Jonah, a gay man, tells his story of discovering that he is attracted to men and the trials of a relationship with a man who is HIV positive. Jonah also deals with his experience of having an adult steal his musical ideas and produce them as his own. It is only when Jonah tells someone else about his experience that he realizes this adult did not have the ability to take Jonah's music away completely.

While Ethan and Ash seem to have a fairytale life and marriage, they too have their trials. Ash has been saddled with the care of her brother, the wayward Goodman who is living as a fugitive from the law in Iceland. Ethan is not aware that Ash knows her brother's whereabouts and that she is actually sending him money. Ethan has not been told because the family knows that the highly moral Ethan would not allow them to live in crime. When Ethan learns about Goodman, the couple's marriage falls apart. Ethan has not been innocent in the breakup of the marriage as he had been harboring feelings of distaste for his autistic son with whom he is unable to connect. He avoids his family, often burying himself in his work. When Ethan is diagnosed with cancer, Jules encourages him to reconnect with Ash. The two reconcile before Ethan dies.

Jules, meanwhile, struggles with her jealousy of Ethan and Ash. Throughout the book, it is apparent that Ethan loves Jules deeply. However, she cares for him only as a friend. She loves Dennis, her husband. She knows that she could have been married to Ethan, living a rich life instead of struggling to get by on what she and Dennis make. However, by the end of the novel, Jules realizes she was not the person who was ever meant to marry Ethan.



# Part One, Chapter One

## Summary

### Part One, Chapter One

Overcoming one's demons is the major theme of the novel *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer. The story follows a group of six friends who meet at a summer camp for the arts camp. As they find their places in life, the six deal with their downfalls, prejudices, fears, and insecurities. The main character Jules Jacobson-Boyd learns that even with the sadness that each character deals with in his life, life is interesting enough to keep them going.

Julie Jacobson is invited to join a group which decides to call themselves the Interestings. She isn't sure why she has been invited, but she is honored to be there. She tries to act in way which will not cause her to be an embarrassment. It is the summer of 1974. The members of the group are on the verge of stepping into adulthood. The members believe themselves not to be as unbearable as those around them. The other teens have been members of the group for several years but it is Julie's first year to attend the camp. She is there because her father died that winter. Julie's mother had insisted that Julie go to the camp, saying that at least one member of the family should enjoy their summer.

Ethan Figman, one of the first people Julie notices at camp, is a member of the group. He is described as being ugly with eczema, but he is talented as an animator. After the group is broken up by a camp counselor on the night of their first meeting, Ethan takes Julie to the animation shed where he shows her a movie that he has put together. He tries to kiss Julie, but she pushes him away. When he learns that she has no experience with boys, he challenges her to spend time with him to see if she has any attraction to him. By the end of the chapter, she realizes that she will never have feelings for Ethan other than that of friendship. She tells Ethan about her feelings.

## Analysis

In this introductory chapter, the premise of the group the Interstings is laid out. Members of the group include Julie (Jules) Jacobson, Ethan Figman, Jonah Bay, Cathy Kiplinger, Goodman Wolf, and Ash Wolf. The feelings of belonging and being wanted are very powerful for Julie as she felt out of place not only in her own life but also at the camp. She believes that she has no place among the people who have chosen to include her in their group. With them, Julie gets a new identity as Jules.

The relationship that Ethan hopes will develop between himself and Jules becomes very important as a theme that will wind its way throughout the novel. Ethan is one of the first people whom Jules notices at the camp. Her sister, Ellen, is quick to point out how ugly Ethan is. Even though Jules doesn't know him, she is quick to defend him, saying that



he doesn't look that ugly to her. Jules notices the way that Ethan is helping the other students and being greeted warmly by them. While she leaves the camp that summer treasuring Ethan as a close friend, she cannot think of him as a boyfriend, as Ethan had hoped that she would.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the significance of Julie's name change to Jules.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the personalities of the people who make up the Interestings.

## **Discussion Question 3**

At this point in her life, how has the death of Jules' father impacted her?

## **Vocabulary**

Obscure, tentative, baroque, obviously, ludicrously, improvisational, pretentious, papal, nefarious, platonic, vicissitudes, empathetically, trajectory, deftly, provocation, utopia, diametrically, atrocity, prefatory, consorting, nominal, antic.



# Part One, Chapters Two and Three

## Summary

### Part One, Chapters Two and Three

In Chapter Two, it is 2007 and Spirit-in-the-Woods is struggling. Edie and Manny try to recall the children who've come through the camp and gone on to become successes. At the conclusion of the chapter, Manny tells Edie that she will read a letter that has come to them from Ethan and Ash.

In Chapter Three, Dennis and Jules Boyd read the Christmas letter from Ethan and Ash. Although Dennis and Jules have stayed close to the couple through the years, Jules cannot help but feel envy of her friends' successful lives whenever she and her husband read their glowing Christmas letters.

## Analysis

This section of the novel takes the reader forward in time nearly fifteen years. Jules and her husband Dennis Boyd are struggling along in their mediocre jobs. Ethan Figman and his wife, Ash Wolf, however, are wildly successful. They are active not only in their careers, but also in fighting poverty and child labor. Even though Jules knows that her friend has had some hard times and has a son who is autistic, she is still envious of Ash's place in life whenever these letters come.

These two chapters deal specifically with Ethan and Ash, who have been successful, and Jules and Dennis, who have not. There is some hint that Ash's brother, Goodman, who was always the disappointment of the family, has committed some highly destructive action that has taken its toll on the entire family. However, no specifics are given as to what this might be. Members of the group that are not mentioned at all in this section are Cathy and Jonah Bay.

Notice how the novel transitions from the owners of the camp reading the letter and their pleasure in the success of their former campers to Dennis and Jules' receipt of the same letter and their hesitant and envious attitude toward it. While Ethan and Ash's success in life is a source of pride for the Wunderliches, it is a source of friction for Jules and Dennis. This example makes a statement that echoes throughout the novel. Circumstances always have two sides. One person may benefit from a particular circumstance, while the same circumstance may harm another.

It is also interesting to learn in this glimpse into the future that it is Ethan and Ash, perhaps the two most unlikely to form a bond with one another, that do wind up together. Since their Christmas letter talks about children and their joint causes, it can be safely assumed that the two are married. Meanwhile, Jules has married someone who was not in the original group of Interesting. It is unsure how close these two



couples are at this point, only that Jules bears some jealousy and dissatisfaction with the way that her life has turned out as compared to Ethan and Ash's.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author decides to place the big time jump between Chapter One and Chapter Two? What does it signify about the main theme of the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jules not like to read the letters sent by Ethan and Ash? Why is she jealous of them?

## Discussion Question 3

What must it be like for Jules to read Ethan and Ash's letters of success, knowing that Ethan loved her first, and that she could have lived that extravagant lifestyle?

## Vocabulary

Gulag, utopia, expurgated, nostalgia, despondent, surreal, minutiae, philanthropic, infuriated, benevolence, decimated, marsupially, eccentric, anthropomorphic, geode, gratified, foist, pretentiously, recede, arbitrarily, fibrillated.



# Part One, Chapters Four and Five

## Summary

### Part One, Chapters Four and Five

In Chapter Four, the first stages of Dennis and Jules' relationship is described. They met at a party at the home of Isador Topfeldt, a mutual friend. Jules learns of Dennis' nervous breakdown and depression from Isador after he leaves the party. Dennis and Jules end up meeting again on the street some time later. They go to the copy store where Isador works and learn that her coworker has died of cancer. Something about the experience draws the two together, and they hurry back to Dennis' apartment where they make love.

Chapter Five describes Jules' last day at camp in the summer of 1974. She feels like a different person from the Julie who came to the camp. Her mother and sister walk in as she is trying to bid farewell to Goodman. Somehow, she knows something bad will happen to him and she will never get the chance again to give him a goodbye hug. As her mother's car takes her away, Jules feels as if she has been kidnapped. A few months later, all of the Interestings get together again in New York City. Ethan has already been the focus of a magazine article about up and coming teenagers. Goodman and Ash are pressured by their father to become successful. At the conclusion of the chapter, all of the friends are entering the Wolf family's apartment building.

## Analysis

The structure of the novel is strange with the reader never knowing where a new chapter might land them on the timeline of Jules' life. It has jumps from 1974 to 2007 back to 1981 when Dennis and Jules met. Then, it goes back to 1974 at the conclusion of Jules' summer at camp. The timeline of the novel seems strange and disjointed with bits of information from the past and present getting jumbled together. The writing is almost a stream of consciousness as the author works through material, moving seamlessly from one topic to another through clever transitions that the reader sometimes has to go back and study to see exactly where the jump was made. For instance, the author transitions from writing about Ash and Jules' acting lessons back to the party where Jules meets Dennis by mentioning that Jules is not introduced as an actress, but instead as a temp because her acting career is not going well.

Information in Chapter hints at the outcomes of some of the other members of the camp group. Jonah, it appears, got caught up in the Unification Church, the religious group known as the Moonies. In Chapter Four, Jules' situation in life seems to be about the same as the situations of Ash and Ethan. In fact, Jules believes she has made a big step in improving her life as she has finally moved out of her mother's house into an apartment of her own.





Notice in Chapter Five how distraught Jules is when she has to leave Spirit-in-the-Woods. It is particularly upsetting for her that she does not get to say goodbye to Goodman the way she had hoped. As she is talking to him, thinking how she would like to give him a hug goodbye, her mother and sister walk in, ruining the moment. Jules thinks at this time that she has some idea, some feeling that Goodman will come to a tragic end. It almost seems as if she is forecasting his death.

In describing Dennis, there are two things that seem to be of importance. First, he isn't an artist. Also, he once suffered a nervous breakdown. Despite these two things that could be considered drawbacks, Jules is still attracted to him. She believes that he is opposite of Ethan. Dennis depression is presented in a way that indicates the disorder is under control with the help of medication. Even so, Dennis is a little uncomfortable talking about what happened to him. He is especially uncomfortable thinking about what other people might be saying about him behind his back.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Ash dumfounded by Jules' attraction to Dennis? How is this similar to the way that Jules is surprised by the relationship between Ash and Ethan?

## Discussion Question 2

How is depression and mental illness portrayed in this section of the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

Describe Jules' feelings about Goodman at the end of her first summer at camp? Why is she so distraught that she has to leave?

## Vocabulary

Tenement, dubious, miniscule, blithely, idiosyncratic, charismatic, phenomenon, parameters, ubiquitous, dowdy, androgyne, indoctrination, poignantly, preen, ambivalent, lucid, spliff, sardonic, astringent, idyllic, atavistic, rudimentary, modulate, hypocritical, ambience, nautical.



# Part One, Chapters Six and Seven

## Summary

### Part One, Chapters Six and Seven

In Chapter Six, when Jonah Bay is eleven years old, Barry Claimes begins “borrowing” him from his mother. When they are alone, Claimes gives Jonah gum or other food spiked with a hallucinogen to help him create songs. At first, Jonah believes he is developing schizophrenia like his cousin. After awhile, Jonah realizes Claimes is drugging him and refuses to go with Claimes any longer. Not too long after this, Jonah hears one of the songs that he made up for Claimes on the radio. Knowing he can do nothing about the injustice, Jonah bears the anger and pain he feels every time he hears the song on the radio.

Also during this time, Jonah begins to realize that he is gay. When the Interestings meet back up in New York, they visit the Wolf apartment where they pair off. Jonah and Ash are together in her bedroom. Although Jonah enjoys the companionship, there is no passion. He wonders if love is just the desire to lie down with someone that he likes.

In Chapter Seven, Jules looks forward to her visits to Ash’s apartment even though her mother sometimes forbids her to go. During one visit, all members of the camp group gather at the Labyrinth for a New Year’s Eve party. When the old year ends, Ethan kisses Jules. He tells her that it is a nostalgia kiss. Ethan tells her she is “great,” a fact Jules tries to argue. She wonders why he is so devoted to her. They talk about their New Year’s resolutions. Jules secretly hopes to be loved by someone other than Ethan.

In the following year, Jules’ New Year’s resolution does not come true. Ash and Jonah break up as do Cathy and Goodman. Cathy and Goodman’s breakup is much more dramatic than that of Ash and Jonah. Although Goodman initiated the breakup, he continues to yearn for Cathy even though she has a new boyfriend. At camp that summer, Goodman sends Ash and Jules to retrieve Cathy for a meeting of the Interestings. But, when the two see her dancing with Tyler, obviously in love, they are unable to bother her. On the last day of camp, the Wunderlichs have the campers lie on the ground head to foot for an aerial photo of the camp. Jules uses her feet to feel Goodman’s head, thinking it is ironic this is the only part of her body that will have such intimate contact with Goodman. Gudrun visits the Interestings again in the teepee. They are worried because they are drinking, but Gudrun tells them this is a friendly visit. When they question her about life, she warns them that their hearts will always be aching.

Through the rest of the year, Goodman remains bitter and drinks, even after school. His parents send him to a psychoanalyst. Things come to a head at the following New Year’s Eve party when Cathy comes without her boyfriend. Jonah has brought hash that he found in his mother’s apartment and they all get high. At Goodman and Cathy’s



request, Jonah hails them a taxi because they tell him they want to have a grand adventure together. At about one a.m., there is a phone call from Goodman. He has been arrested. He says that Cathy claims that he raped her. The friends convince the Wolfs to let them go to the police department with Ash.

## Analysis

In this section of chapters some mysteries that have lingered during the prior sections of the novel are cleared up. Jonah left his mother's concert at the camp because of his background with Barry Claimes. Apparently, the man had been drugging Jonah to get him to make up songs and rhythms so that Barry could copy them. It makes sense that Jonah would not want to be around when this man who had used him so unfairly and drugged him without his knowledge, was being celebrated during the concert.

Also, during this section it is learned that Jonah has decided that he is gay. Even so, he dates Ash. He is comfortable with Ash and enjoys being around her, but the two never have the passion of Cathy and Goodman, or Cathy and Troy. Ethan's fascination with her continues to bother Jules. She realizes that he still wants her badly, but she still cannot make herself feel anything for him but friendship. She feels guilty when she wishes that there were someone else who loved her, other than Ethan, whom she could love in return.

Things go from bad to worse for Goodman. Although he is the one who breaks up with Cathy, he seems to go through some sort of feelings of rejection, especially after she gets a new boyfriend. He begins drinking to the point that his parents send him to a psychoanalyst. On New Year's Eve, Cathy and Goodman the Wolf house together as her boyfriend had not come with her to this party. The family's stress caused by Goodman's erratic behavior comes to a head when they get a call from Goodman saying that he has been arrested because Cathy accused him of raping her.

## Discussion Question 1

Consider the scope of what Barry Claims did to Jonah. Was what he did illegal? In what ways? What should Jonah have done along with refusing to spend time with him any longer?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Goodman get so upset when Cathy goes on with her life when it was he who broke up with her? What does this demonstrate about Goodman?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jonah blame himself for what happened to Cathy and Goodman? Why is it significant that he thinks it is because he drugged them?

## Vocabulary

Solarium, magnanimously, brogue, cartographer, nascent, winsome, tacitly, interloper, perfunctory, indigenous, charismatic, surreptitious, slovenly, finials, nostalgia, imponderable, uncircumscribed, revelers, reticent, pristine, plangent.



# Part One, Chapters Eight and Nine

## Summary

### Part One, Chapters Eight and Nine

In Chapter Eight, Ethan takes charge of Ash when they leave the police station. Jules watches, but doesn't notice the significance of the moment she is seeing between the two of them. It is the beginning of their love. Meanwhile, life becomes more and more stressful at the Wolf house. Ash calls Jules one day telling her that Goodman is having emotional trouble along with his legal trouble. He's drinking more and more. She asks Jules to try to talk to Cathy. Jules arranges the meeting with Cathy, but it doesn't go like any of them hoped. Jules leaves the meeting unsure if Goodman is really innocent, as Goodman is insisting. Finally, Goodman disappears for good one day. Ash holds out hope that he will return.

Although Troy, Cathy, and Goodman won't be there, Ash, Jules, Ethan, and Jonah decide to return to Spirit-in-the-Woods for their last summer. Once Jules arrives at the camp, she believes coming there is a mistake as nothing is the same. Jules is even more shocked and almost angered when Ethan comes into the girl's teepee one night and gets into bed with Ash. Even though she'd seen their love affair developing, Jules is still shocked when she is hit with the reality.

In Chapter Nine, Jules is confounded by the fact that Ash and Ethan's love makes her feel lonelier. The remaining members of the group get their acceptance letters for college. Goodman has been gone for a year. Jules goes to visit Jonah often in his mother's loft because she feels like she needs to limit the time she spends at the Labyrinth. Ethan and Ash are basically living together there. Ash confides to Jules that Ethan is a good lover. Jules has to remind herself that she'd had the opportunity to have Ethan but had not wanted him.

Meanwhile, the family seems to be recovering from their grief in the loss of Ethan. They've planned a summer trip to Iceland and have invited Jules to come along. As soon as they land in Iceland, Jules has a case of food poisoning that puts her to bed. When she wakes, there is a note giving directions to a café where the family can be found. At the café, Jules finds the family visiting with Goodman. When he ran away, he'd had gone to Spirit-in-the-Woods where Gudrun had taken him to Iceland to live and work with her.

## Analysis

Chapter Seven had actually gone back in time to 1970 when Jonah was drugged by Barry Claimes. However, Chapter Eight and the chapters that follow run in chronological order. This information is important for the reader to have in light of the fact that Jonah



feels responsible for what happened between Cathy and Goodman because he had brought drugs to the party, after which they had gone away together.

It is also in this part of the novel that Jules begins to feel jealous of Ash. She is lonely because she has no significant other and is at the same time blown away by the fact that Ash could be attracted to Ethan. Although Jules had tried to feel something for Ethan other than friendship alone, she was unable to do so. Although she witnessed the beginning of the relationship when Ethan took charge of Ash after her brother is arrested, Jules did not recognize what was happening.

Jules' mother is not a major character in this novel, but she is worth mentioning for her actions when Ash comes to visit Jules at the family home on Cindy Drive. Jules is openly sarcastic and hateful about her home and her feelings about her home. She does not want Ash to see where she lives. However, since Ash needs to get away from her own home because of her pain in missing Goodman, Jules agrees for her to come. In her insecurity about the house, Jules cleans and puts away things that she thinks will give Ash the wrong impression. Jules' mother has just lost her husband. She is struggling with grief and trying to keep a life together for her two daughters. Knowing that her daughter is ashamed of their home must be painful for her. Instead of getting angry with Jules for "cleaning up" when it is obvious Jules is hiding things of which she is embarrassed, she simply says "thank you."

The other foot falls in this section of the book when Jules is let in on the secret that Goodman is alive and well in Iceland. He has been there for quite a while, living with the Spirit-in-the-Woods counselor, Gudrun Sigurdottir. Although the family has known where Goodman was, they have chosen to incriminate themselves by not turning him in to the authorities. They believe that he is innocent. They have also chosen to incriminate Jules by letting her in on their family secret. Ethan is unaware that the Wolfs know Goodman's whereabouts. He is unable to go on the Iceland trip because he is caring for his mentor, Mo Templeton, who is dying. The family is not planning on telling Ethan about Goodman as they are afraid that he would insist that Goodman be turned in or that he might turn Goodman in himself.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Goodman in Iceland?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Jules so embarrassed by her childhood home?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does the Wolf family not tell Ethan about Goodman?



## Vocabulary

Bicentennial, incongruous, retrospect, patrician, aberration, ardor, matriculate, surreal, physique, gratification, cartilaginous, insular, feral, liar, locus, ablutions, olfactory, impetuously, prurient, unequivocally, carbuncles, embryonic, telepathic, repository, phenomenon, nostalgic, existential, soliloquy, cachet, percussively.



# Part Two, Chapters Ten and Eleven

## Summary

### Part Two, Chapters Ten and Eleven

Chapter Ten opens with Ethan and Ash celebrating the signing of a one year contract for Figland. Ash has decided she wants to direct plays or works written by women. After a confrontation with her acting teacher, Jules decides to stop trying to act. She goes to school to get a degree in social work. Ethan and Ash have broken up only once in their relationship. This was because Ash had slept with another man after a college party. Ethan visits Jules in her dorm and tries to touch one of her nipples during a back rub. She pushes him off immediately. After much grief, Ash and Ethan do reunite. When Ash's father invites Ethan to lunch, alone, Ethan is afraid he will bring up the topic of marriage. Gil doesn't, only talks to Ethan about quitting his job. He is the one who encourages Ethan to go back to the people who run the show that he'd first been working on and pitch them the idea of Figland. Before leaving, Gil shows Ethan a stack of charcoal drawings that he has done. The last one shows Ash and Goodman playing with Noodge when he was a puppy. Though the art is bad, Ethan realizes it is a means of escape for Gil and encourages him to keep drawing.

The next section of the chapter details Ash and Ethan's activities after they leave the Japanese restaurant. Ash has become obsessed with the book *Drama of the Gifted Child*. Ethan asks about Goodman, and tells Ash they could hire a private detective to try to find him. Ash asks Ethan to leave things alone and stop torturing her.

In Chapter Eleven, Dennis goes out to buy a copy of *Media Now*. He and Jules are happy to learn that Ethan has been included on the list of 100 most influential people. Both Ash and Jules get married. Goodman remains in Iceland and Ash pulls Jules aside to talk about him occasionally. Although they start their lives out poor, Jules and Dennis assume their condition will improve.

Ash and Jules continue their friendship. They have an outing to a sex toy emporium for women. The two buy vibrators which become the topic of inside jokes until they are forgotten. Although their friendship is solid, their lives are imbalanced. Jules wonders if the money that Ethan is making has changed his attitude toward being rich. She pictures Ash and Ethan getting up and walking to their walk-in refrigerator. She wonders if the two will continue to want to be friends with them. Dennis becomes angry with her because she is indicating she is unhappy with their life when he is happy where he is. Their argument ends when Ash calls them on the phone to invite them to dinner. Ethan reaches to pay for the bill and they let him.

Ethan takes Jules and Dennis, Jonah and Robert, and himself and Ash on a trip to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. During a trip to Paris, Jules asks Ethan how he knew how to act around money. He tells her that he wings it, but seems uncomfortable. Jules is





disappointed because he seems comfortable in his money. Ash continues to slip away to visit Goodman whenever she can. When Jules tells Dennis about Goodman, he comments that the Wolfs' behavior is very arrogant. He is especially surprised that Ash keeps the secret from Ethan.

As Jules' and Ash's careers begin to grow, they begin to think about having children. Ash's play at Open Hand Theater has been popular with a New York Times review. At a dinner to celebrate Ash's success, the waiter doesn't pay good attention to the list of foods that Dennis can't eat. At the end of the meal, he tells Jules that he doesn't feel well. He begins vomiting and his pulse is "tacking." EMS comes to take him to the hospital.

## Analysis

It is at this point in the novel that Ash's and Jules' lives begin to become distinctly different. At his future father-in-law's prodding, Ethan pitches his idea for Figland to the producers of a show for which he had recently quit working. The producers agree to do the show. Ethan is on his way. Beginning with their weddings, the differences in Jules' and Ash's married lives become apparent. Jules and Dennis are married in a small, private wedding with few guests. Ash and Ethan, however, have a large extravagant wedding. People believe that Ash's parents are trying to make up through the wedding for the fact that Goodman is not there.

As Ethan and Ash's lifestyle continues to improve, Jules is dogged by the fear that Ethan and Ash will be embarrassed by being around them. While Ash and Ethan have moved up to a larger apartment with a walk-in refrigerator, Jules and Dennis still live in the same small walk up in which they started out their married life. It is after Ethan earns a spot on a list of the most powerful people in media that Jules and Dennis realize their friend has enough money to pay when they go out to dinner together, especially when their destination is one that is out of Jules' and Dennis' price range.

Jules and Dennis have a tragedy when Dennis eats something at a celebratory meal at a restaurant with Ethan, Ash and Jonah. Dennis vomits, then passes out in the restaurant. Because it is hinted strongly in the text leading up to Dennis' episode that somehow the waiter must not have understood the severity of the issues it might cause if Dennis were to eat any sort of food that might interfere with his antidepressant, it is suspected that this is what has happened to Dennis. As she waits for the EMS workers, Jules for a minute forgets her jealousy of Ash and Ethan, believing life will be all right if only Dennis survives his episode.

## Discussion Question 1

What is so significant to Dennis and Jules about Ethan's rise to fame?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Ash get so upset with Ethan when he suggests they could hire a private detective to find Goodman?

## Discussion Question 3

Consider Jules' feelings when Dennis gets sick. She suddenly feels that what she and Dennis have is enough, and she wants that back, she is no longer concerned about Ash and Ethan's good fortune. How does this happen?

## Vocabulary

Deconstruct, eminently, regalia, unplundered, masochistic, vivacious, duchy, intuitively, plaintively, cohabitante, satirical, blitheness, natty, fetish, ambidextrous, effusive, inimitable, maudlin, gemological, precocious, burgeoning, mantra, neophyte, inured, paradox, condescending, intractable, sanctifying, tacit, commiserate, sublet, primacy, lurid, purge, obliquely, lithe, cunt, nebulous, disparity, hiatus, rube, clandestine, putative, extrapolating, anatomical, morose.

# Part Two, Chapters Twelve and Thirteen

## Summary

### Part Two, Chapters Twelve and Thirteen

In Chapter Twelve, Jonah and Robert begin discussing Jules' "prayer" over the sick Dennis. This discussion about prayer transforms into a discussion of when the two met and the first time they had sex together. The topic of the chapter then turns to Cathy as Jonah thinks of the similarities of the group of friends sitting together in the emergency room and the night they sat together in the police department. He wonders where Cathy is and what she is doing. He remembers feeling guilty about what happened between Cathy and Goodman that night, the way that Ethan feels guilty about Dennis getting sick. When Jules does get word that Dennis has had a mild stroke but that he will recover, Ethan tells Jules to go to her husband and he will take care of the paperwork.

The next section of the chapter describes Jonah's encounter with Hannah and Joel and the events leading up to his decision to join the Moonies. Jonah's mother tries to tell him his decision is a mistake, but he doesn't listen. After Jonah's mother calls Ethan and Ash, they set up a deprogramming program for Jonah. Ethan, Ash and Jules manage to get him away from the farm by asking him to give them a tour of the town. Susannah, however, stays behind because the people show an interest in her music. She joins the church and is joined in an arranged marriage to a younger man. She lives on the farm the rest of her life.

In Chapter Thirteen, after Dennis' stroke he relapses into his depression. Tricyclic antidepressants aren't strong enough for him. He has a break down with a client and loses his job. When Jules realizes she is pregnant, she thinks back to a day before Dennis' stroke when she might have gotten pregnant. She remembers a certain evening after a museum opening for an exhibit about Figland. Three months after Jules' baby Aurora is born, Ash has a baby girl named Larkin.

One day, Ash comes to talk to Jules. She tells Jules that her parents want her to take over paying Goodman's expenses. Ash has agreed to do so, but Ethan still does not even know that the family knows where Goodman is. She is determined that she can find some way to support her brother without her husband finding out.

Although Jules and Ash had hoped their children would be close friends, they are opposites of one another. Aurora changes her name to Rory when she goes to school. She is active and unable to sit still. While Jules is envious of Ash and Ethan, Rory is envious of boys.

At a conference, Jules sees Goodman's old psychoanalyst. She asks him if he remembers anything about Goodman. The man indicates that Goodman was guilty, but



also believes that he had killed the girl whom he had raped. His daughter tells Jules that her father has dementia and often gets things mixed up.

## Analysis

With Dennis relapsed into depression, Goodman's old therapist thinking that Goodman not only raped but also killed Cathy and Jonah and his mother's encounters with the Moonies, the tone of these two chapters are very somber. Although Dennis has survived his episode, his therapists want him to stop taking to MOA inhibitor that has worked so well for him. Even though they try him on a variety of new antidepressants, nothing brings Dennis back to himself. He is eventually so emotionally weak and unstable that he loses his job as an ultrasound technician because of an outburst at work. It is in the middle of this distinctly rough section of their life that Jules realizes she is pregnant. She has a little girl whom she names Aurora. Just a few months later Ash has a baby girl named Larkin.

Discussions of two different topics are introduced when attention is brought to Jonah. One of the topics deals with religion. First, Jonah and his partner, Robert, discuss whether or not Jules was praying for Dennis at the time of his attack in the restaurant. Jonah does not believe that she was. This idea of prayer leads to a discussion of Jonah's short time with the Moonies. Even though he doesn't realize it, Jonah is lonely and looking for a place to belong when he is approached by a couple who are members of the Unification Church. They invite him to spend a weekend with them, which turns into Jonah's decision to join the group. Jonah's mother argues against his decision but is unable to make any headway with him. She sends Jonah's friends try to separate him from the church. They successfully do so and nurse Jonah through the process of reprogramming him so that he won't return.

The story is different for Jonah's mother, however. Although Susannah Bay had fought against her son's involvement with the Unification Church, she is quickly sucked in by the members when she visits to try to get her son to leave. Susannah had been struggling with the loss of her popularity as a musician and a lack of the ability to produce a type of music that the people want to hear. The Moonies, however, ask for music lessons from her and admire her talent. Even though it is believed that she would not change the words to her signature song, she tells the Moonies that she would consider a wording change if they wanted to use the song as their theme song. This example shows how cunning the members of religious cults can be in luring new members. They find the aspect of a person's personality that is most in need and fill that need. For Jonah, they filled his loneliness, for Susannah, they filled her need for someone to appreciate her musical talents.

With Jonah and Robert, the author also takes the opportunity not only to discuss a gay relationship but also a gay relationship when one of the partners is HIV positive. While Jonah loves Robert, he is afraid of getting the disease. Robert tells him about the precautions they can take, claiming he has researched the topic well. When Jonah seems to want another opinion, Robert calls a helpline that give Jonah the same



information. Through this section of the novel, the author cleverly not only addresses the idea that it is dangerous to have sex with an HIV positive person, but also mentions what is and isn't safe.

Important in this section is Jonah's realization of how much Ethan cares for Jules. When Ethan, Ash, Jules and Susannah have come to the Moonies' farm to lure Jonah away, Jonah believes he is experiencing some sort of extra sensory perception brought on by his religious experience when he notices the way that Ethan looks at Jules. He seems to believe that this is something which only he has noticed.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that the author includes information about Jonah's experience with the Unification Church?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the author trying to communicate by allowing Dennis to have a relapse into his depression?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Jules' encounter with Goodman's former therapist?

## Vocabulary

Sublime, articulated, languished, menace, pensive, taciturn, predilection, parameters, lasciviously, palpitating, proprietary, asymptomatic, renegade, belligerent, sardonically, contraindicated, monosyllabic, agnostic, ostentatiously, squeamish, abdicated, rhetorical, communal, megalomaniac, epiphany, leached, aesthetic, malignant, futility, perfunctory, diaphanous, unobtrusive, demented, atypical, intractability, convex, precarious, metaphorical.

# Part Two, Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen

## Summary

### Part Two, Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen

In Chapter Fourteen, Mo is diagnosed with autism. Ethan hides his anger and disappointment by throwing himself into his work. Now that they have children, Ethan and Ash, and Dennis and Jules do not see one another as often as they once had. Ethan realizes that he misses Jules. During a group vacation to Indonesia, Ethan asks Jules and Dennis to let him help them. They refuse his first offer.

While in Indonesia, Ethan visits one of the factories making his product. He is not well pleased with the wages but at the same time, he doesn't hate himself after what he's seen. He decides to do what he can to raise the wages of the people. He shops, and eats, then gets a sudden feeling he has only been shown what the factory manager wanted him to see. He returns to the factory to find at least a dozen teenagers and children added to the work force. It is at this point that Ethan realizes he has to wake up from his false notion that bad things would never happen to him.

When the families return to America, Ethan goes to visit Dennis and Jules. Jules tries to discourage him but he insists. When he reaches the apartment, he hugs her. He tells her about his visit to the factory. He says that when his lawyer and executive began talking about moving manufacturing back to the U.S., they began to fight. When talks resumed, he said he was told that his company would lose a lot of money but that he believes the change is one he has to make in order to live with himself. While he knows he will be harming the people overseas by taking away their jobs, he has been looked into starting a school there.

Continuing their visit, Ethan thanks Jules for helping out their family by going with Ash to the appointments. Then, he admits to her where he was when Mo was being diagnosed with autism. He tells Jules that he isn't sure if he loves Mo. Jules tells him that he does love his son, but she warns him not to leave the burden of caring for Mo to Ash again. Ethan presents Jules with a check for one hundred thousand dollars. He tells her he wants her to use the money to move her family to a new house where Rory will actually have a bedroom. She tries to give the check back but he refuses to take it.

Rory tells her father about the money, but gets the amount wrong. When he learns how much Ethan has given them, he feels very embarrassed. Jules tells him they have to take it so they can move. She also wants him to keep trying to fight his way out of the depression. Rory comes in and demands that they kiss.

In Chapter Fifteen, Jules, Dennis, and Rory move into a new apartment. Ash helps them move in. The night of the move, Ash's mother dies. The morning after Betsy's funeral, Jules gets a call from Goodman. He is strange and torments Jules until she finally



hangs up on him. In day-to-day life, Ethan has gone into a few ventures that have failed, Ash continues to direct a few plays. Jules' practice seems to be shrinking because of insurance and the high use of antidepressants.

During a dinner with Ash and Ethan, Shyla talks about a friend of hers who participated in a clinical trial for a new antidepressant. Ethan helps Jules get Dennis into the program. With the help of the new drug, Dennis slowly returns to himself. He is even able to go back to work. Jules does not feel as envious of Ethan and Ash any longer. The 2001 terrorist attacks make everyone nervous.

Jules watches television as a woman is being interviewed about continuing paychecks for people killed at the World Trade Center. The woman seems familiar to Jules. She believes that it is Cathy Kiplinger. She calls Jonah to get his opinion. He believes she is correct and compares her situation to her situation with Goodman. He asks Jules her opinion of Cathy's claim that Goodman had raped her. Jules refuses to answer.

## Analysis

Author Wolitzer again addressed a topic that is of widespread concern as Ethan and Ash's son is diagnosed with autism. Notice the differences in Ash and Ethan's strategies for dealing with their handicapped son. He lies and tells Ash that because of work, he will not be able to attend the appointments. Ethan later admits to Jules that he did not have to work, but just checked himself into a hotel to distance himself from the situation. Jules warns himself not make Ash have to handle the load of taking care of Mo. Ethan admits to Jules that he is not even sure if he loves his son.

Another experience during this section of the novel leaves Ethan stunned. He goes to visit one of his factories overseas. In his announced visit, everything looks fine but Ethan is concerned because the wages are so low. As he shops and gets something to eat, Ethan begins to feel a growing uncertainty about the nature of the tour. He wonders if he saw the factory as it really was, or if he saw only what the manager wanted him to see. Ethan doubles back to the factory and makes a surprise visit. During this visit, the number of workers has been increased by at least a dozen child and teenaged workers. Ethan decides to move his factories back to the U.S. and to start a school for the children in the area.

Also in this section of the novel, Ethan finally makes Jules take money to help the family get a better place. Dennis seems angry at first when Rory tells him that Jules has taken money from Ethan, but is astounded when he learns how much money they have been given. Because they are struggling so hard, the couple agrees to use the money to move to a larger apartment in a building with an elevator.

In this section of the novel, Cathy re-enters the story. She is now an executive for some sort of company that is having trouble providing insurance and paychecks for employees after the 2001 terrorist attacks. The people accuse her of taking advantage of them and never intending to pay the money due to their loved ones who were killed.



Cathy, in a news report on live television, claims that these accusations are false. When Jules realizes it is Cathy on the television, she calls Jonah to confirm her suspicion. Jonah brings up an interesting point as the two discuss the situation with Goodman and the one that Cathy finds herself in with her workers. They are accusing Cathy that she has done something wrong though there is really no proof that Cathy is guilty to trying to keep the people from having the money they rightfully earned. In the same instance, Cathy accused Goodman of raping her, an accusation that really could not be backed up with facts. Jonah seems to lean in the direction that Goodman really didn't rape Cathy. When he asks Jules' opinion, Jules refuses to discuss it. This could be because Jules' doubts if Goodman is as innocent as the others think that he is.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Ethan unable to connect with Mo? Why does he lie about being able to attend his appointment?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do Jules and Dennis finally agree to take money from Ethan?

## Discussion Question 3

At this point in the novel, do you believe Goodman raped Cathy? Cite specific examples from the novel.

## Vocabulary

Restorative, intone, snidely, enigmatic, ergonomic, reconnaissance, pious, incontrovertible, sated, tenacious, modulate, overtly, docent, extricated, juxtaposed, ambient, disparity, extemporizing, fractious, calamity, hyperkinetic, trepidation, felicitous.





# Part Two, Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen

## Summary

### Part Two, Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen

In Chapter Sixteen, during a fund raising event, Robert breaks up with Jonah. After the break-up, Jonah goes to Ash and Ethan's house. They aren't at home but Rose, the housekeeper gets Ash on the phone and she asks him to stay at the house and keep an eye on the children. The next morning, Jonah is surprised by Mo's skill and understanding of mechanics in working with his Legos. As they eat breakfast together, Jonah wishes he had been raised in an environment like the one the Figman children have.

In Chapter Seventeen, it is 2010. Manny and Edie have fired Paul Wheelwright, the man who they'd hired to oversee the camp. Enrollment is down and they want to go a different way. Paul tells them that he is disappointed because he feels the camp could be profitable if they would let him make some changes to make it more attractive to modern kids. He suggests they ask Ethan for money. Despite his suggestions to make the camp more feasible in the 20th century, Paul is turned out.

On the bus one day, Jules sees Jane Zell and her twin sister with the neurological disorder. Jane tells Jules that she has seen Manny and Edie. She mentions that while the camp is still running, it is just limping along. She mentions that the couple is looking for someone new to run the camp. Jules quickly decides to apply for the job and she and Dennis are accepted. The position is provisional. Jules closes her practice, Dennis quits his job with the promise he will be rehired if the camp doesn't work out.

## Analysis

Probably the most significant part of these two chapters is when Jules and Dennis are hired to run Spirit-in-the-Woods. With its representation of a place where Jules was really happy, and a place where she first felt accepted, one has to wonder what her return to the camp will be like for her.

Also during this section of the novel, notice that others react differently to Mo when compared to the way his father sees him. Jonah, for instance, recognizes in Mo a deep understanding of mechanical workings. Mo's older sister, Larkin, is also patient in dealing with her handicapped brother.

In this section of the novel Jonah and Robert break up. Since he has decided that he is not going to die, Robert wants to have a relationship with someone more emotionally and physically available than Jonah. Jonah is distraught and goes to the Wolf's home.



While there, he finds himself wishing that he had grown up in this type of household with parents like Ash and Ethan instead of his own.

The arts and the future of the arts is a topic that is discussed in this part of the novel. This discussion takes place when the Wunderliches fire their current camp director because enrollment has been down. While they want to camp to remain true to its roots, the director insists that they need to make the camp more up to date with computers and such in order to attract modern teens. He even suggests offering sports along with the arts, a suggestion that the Wunderliches are sternly against. They take his suggestion of adding llama care to the list of activities, then fire him.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is it significant that Jules and Dennis are hired as directors of Spirit-in-the-Woods?

## **Discussion Question 2**

In your opinion, was Paul Wheelwright right in his suggestions for change at Spirit-in-the-Woods? What might you have done differently?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Jonah's interaction with Mo significant? What does he see in the boy that Ethan does not?

## **Vocabulary**

Diminutive, recoil, derision, crass, barrage, emanating, jocular, provisionally, aperture, verve, impetuous, lore.



# Part Three, Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen

## Summary

Part Three, Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen

In Chapter Eighteen, Jules realizes how much work the camp involves. It is not the place that she remembers from her teenage years. Even though she is overcome by the work, she feels awed and inspired when the students perform.

In Chapter Nineteen, the hyper-rich attend Ethan's Master Seminars. He justifies these seminars by thinking of the way that much of the proceeds go to the Anti-Child-Labor Initiative. A boy in the class tells Ethan he is an animator. Ethan encourages him but tells him that he might want to rethink his career plans. He considers that he was mean to the boy and thinks how he should do something nice to make up for it. His assistant tells him that his special guest for the week is there. He goes to meet Jonah.

Jonah Bay is going to attend a lecture by the astronaut Wick Mallard. On his way there he is distracted by music coming from another of the rooms. It is the singer Barry Claimes who is singing the Selfish Shellfish. As Jonah listen to Barry tell his story, his throat and chest constrict. He goes to the restroom. While there Barry comes in. When he leaves, Jonah follows him.

In his hotel room, Jonah pushes Barry onto the bed, pinning him down. His hits the man across the face with his banjo. Barry tries to talk to him but Jonah won't listen. He leaves and takes Barry's banjo with him. Back in his hotel room, Jonah gets a call inviting him to have a drink with Ethan. Although he knows it is a bad idea, Jonah agrees.

Ethan asks Jonah to tell what is bothering him. After some fishing, Jonah admits that he wishes he had been a musician. He tells Ethan what Barry did to him. Ethan suggested that the man did not steal all of Jonah's music. Jonah later thinks about this question. In his hotel room, he picks up Barry's banjo and begins to play. He plays songs he doesn't even remember learning.

## Analysis

It is significant that Jonah finally has the opportunity to come face to face with Barry. Although Barry does not admit to having stolen Jonah's work, the act of having a confrontation with the man helps Jonah to break down a wall that has been in his life for a long time. When Jonah later meets with Ethan, he cannot hold back the emotions brought to the surface by his encounter with Barry. When he tells Ethan what has happened, Ethan reminds Jonah that Barry has not stolen all of his music from him.



Jonah returns to his hotel room and picks up a banjo he stole from Barry. He spends the rest of the evening playing.

Also in this section of the novel, Jules seems to be overwhelmed with the amount of work that the camp director's job entails. When she visits all of the places that she remembers from her youth at the camp, she feels differently about the experience. The teepees seem tight, with no air. She is no longer one of the campers, but is an older person, an authority figure, somewhat in the same category as the campers' parents.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Compare and contrast Spirit-in-the-Woods with Ethan's Mastery Seminars.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is it significant that Jonah finally confronts Barry Claimes for drugging him and stealing his music even though it was years later?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Jules want to return to Spirit-in-the-Woods?

## **Vocabulary**

Segue, menial, carnal, competence, androgynous, arbitrary, enraptured, pretentious, saturation, ostensibly, unobtrusive, dichotomy, stymieing, incarnation, nostalgic, pompously, embodying, stereophonic, accouterments, irreparable.



# Part Three, Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One

## Summary

### Part Three, Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One

In Chapter Twenty, the children in the camp begin to report they have seen a strange man in the woods. Jules and Dennis walk the woods looking for the man. Jules is the one who finds him. As she tries to explain to him the camp is not public property, she gets the feeling there is something wrong with him. As she talks, an older man joins them. Jules doesn't recognize him at first, but then she notices his expression. When he calls her by her last name, she knows for sure it is Goodman. Goodman tells Jules the man with him is Martin, the two of them had met just the day before. Goodman insinuates that it is because he learned that Jules was there that he came back. When Dennis meets up with Jules and discovers the man is Goodman, he threatens to call the police. Goodman agrees to leave. Dennis tells him to go back to his life. Dennis learns that Martin has come from Langton Hall.

Jules calls Ash to tell her that she has seen Goodman. Apparently, Ash has the phone on speaker and Ethan hears. Ash tells Jules she has to go. The next day, Ash calls Jules back telling her that she is at the Prague Airport on her way home, she and Ethan have broken up. Jules has trouble thinking about anything but the fact that she has unintentionally caused the end of Ethan and Ash's marriage. Ash has taken Mo and gone to Colorado. She promises Jules she'll call, but doesn't. One night while looking through e-mails, Dennis tells Jules to call Ethan. She doesn't, believing that Ethan is angry with her.

Manny and Edie offer Dennis and Jules a five-year contract at the camp. Dennis wants to accept but Jules says it hasn't been what she thought it would be. Dennis becomes angry with her saying she is more concerned about her friends than their own relationship. He is especially angry now that he has met Goodman. The next morning, the two decide to turn down the offer.

In Chapter Twenty-one, Dennis' ultrasound clinic takes him back. Jules, however, finds no clients to rebuild her practice. Dennis holds the family together, just as Jules did when he suffered through his depression. Her mother calls to tell her she is selling the house and needs help in cleaning out the basement. Jules apologizes to her sister for bragging and making her jealous after going to camp, Ellen, meanwhile, tells Ellen that she acted the way she did because she was a bitch.

Jules meets Ethan for dinner. He talks about what went wrong between himself and Ash. He mentions that though she is a feminist, she never really considered Cathy's point of view about what had happened between she and Goodman. He believes Ash's



parents pressured her not only into being the perfect child but also into protecting Goodman whom he describes as being “horrible.” Even though the two can’t come to a consensus on their feelings about Goodman, they agree the case appears to be in the past. Both detectives who worked the case are dead. The tavern on the Green is gone, and Goodman is ruined. Ethan tells Jules he has seen Cathy and she is doing well. He believes that she was traumatized by something, but that it had been healed by time. Jules suggests that this may be what Ash and Ethan need.

Ethan tells Jules that he has cancer. He teasingly blames Jules for making him take off his hat at camp. He never wore it again. He tells her that he’s been through two rounds of chemotherapy and doctors are starting a new type of therapy. She tells him that he has to tell Ash so she can take care of him. Instead, he tells Jules that she is the one. Jules agrees to go to the doctor with him but says that he has to tell Ash the truth about Mo, giving Cathy money, and being sick. When she gets home, Jules tells Dennis about Ethan’s cancer. She falls against her husband noting that he seems to be pulling the marriage back together.

## Analysis

The strange man who has been being seen around the camp property turns out to be Goodman. He has returned because he has heard that Jules is now director of the camp. Although she has nursed a crush on Goodman for years, she barely recognizes the old, weathered man with gold tooth that Goodman has become. Dennis, who has never met Goodman before, but tells Jules several times that he has no respect or liking for the boy or his family, has no trouble telling Goodman that he will call the police if he doesn’t disappear. Dennis also takes charge of the young man who had run away from a nearby psychiatric hospital and fallen in with Goodman. Although Jules had nothing to do with Goodman appearing at the camp, he seems to be angry with Jules when he finds her talking to the man.

In her shock, Jules calls Ash and doesn’t even think to ask if Ethan is near. Because Ash and Ethan are overseas, the connection is bad and Jules doesn’t hear when Ash tells her that she is putting her on speakerphone. Jules is distraught when she learns that Ethan has heard everything she has said and now knows that Ethan knows about Goodman. Things snowball from bad to worse when Jules gets a call from Ash saying that she and Ethan have broken up. Because Jules is so upset by the news that she has inadvertently caused the breakup of her best friends, she and Dennis get into a fight when Jules decides that she doesn’t want to work at the camp any longer. Dennis seems angry because it was Jules idea to try to work at the camp but she hasn’t really seemed to be that involved in the work. He feels as if much of the labor has fallen to him. He also tells Jules that he has not found her friends to be as interesting as she portrayed them to be, yet she seems to be more invested and interested in them than their own marriage.

Ethan again reaches out to Jules when he learns that he has cancer. Although it is obvious that he wishes that the two of them could have a sexual relationship, Jules



refuses. Even though Ethan is famous and Jules could have all the money that she has desired, she knows that the relationship is wrong. She agrees with Ethan that she will go with him to his doctors' appointments if he will try to reconcile with Ash.

## Discussion Question 1

Does it surprise you that Goodman has returned to Spirit-in-the-Woods? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Dennis so angry that Jules does not want to continue the job at the camp though they were offered a five-year contract?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Ethan is still trying to make moves on Jules even though he is dying? What does this say about him? What does it say about Jules that she resists temptation and tells him that he needs to get back with Ash?

## Vocabulary

Quotidian, defected, poignant, feral, unperturbed, truculent, telekinesis, condescending, refute, gesticulating, anarchic, benevolent, utopia, exuberance, vigilant, fallow, demeanor, disheveled, morose, cordial, tenacious, iteration.



# Part Three, Chapter Twenty-Two

## Summary

In Chapter Twenty-Two, Ash and Ethan, Jules and Dennis, and Jonah meet for dinner twice. In the spring, Ethan is dying. Jules goes to work with adolescent groups at a Child and Family Center in Manhattan. Ethan and Ash try an alternative therapy, but Ethan quits five days into the therapy. One day, Ash calls Jules to tell her that Ethan has had a heart attack and could not be revived.

## Analysis

Things wrap up in this chapter. Jonah has been playing in a band teaching Mo how to play the banjo. Jules gets a job working with adolescent groups at a clinic. Larkin gets a tattoo in an attempt to honor her father. Mo gets upset when Ethan yells at Larkin about the tattoo. He goes to Mo to comfort him, really trying to mean his words when he tells the boy he wants to be with him. Ethan cries when the boy plays him a version of “The Wind Will Carry Us” on his banjo.

The reader is never told if Ethan decides to leave his friends any of his wealth or not. He seems to be afraid that it will change them, perhaps the way that it changed him. The storyboard that Ash sends after Ethan’s death is more important to Jules. It was obviously drawn during their first summer at camp together as Ethan hoped their relationship would turn out differently. The novel ends with Jules’ thoughts. Even though nothing seemed to turn out like she and the others wanted, life was still interesting in spite of so much pain and disappointment.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that it is never noted how much money, if any, Ethan leaves his friends?

## Discussion Question 2

What does the storyboard that Ash gives to Jules after Ethan’s death represent?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Ash realizes how much Ethan has always loved Jules? Why or why not?



## Vocabulary

Compendium, dysmorphia, euphemism, peripheral, opaque.



# Characters

## Julie “Jules” Jacobson-Boyd

Julie “Jules” Jacobson-Boyd is a girl from Underhill who attends Spirit-in-the-Woods on a scholarship the summer after her father’s death. She is invited to be a member of the Interestings, but she never feels that she is really a bona fide member of the group. During her first summer at the camp, a friendly and talented but ugly boy, Ethan Figman challenges her to try a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship with him. Jules is never able to see Ethan as anything but a friend. Ethan makes a couple of passes at her later in their lives, both at times when his girlfriend/wife had broken up with him. Jules turns down both of these passes because his significant other is also her best friend.

Although Jules had a vision of becoming an actress, her dream is never realized. She and Ash take acting lessons from a teacher who finally tells Jules that she needs to quit trying to act. Jules is introduced to Dennis Boyd by a mutual friend and the two get married. She opens a private practice as a social worker while her husband takes classes to be an ultrasound technician. Even with both Jules and Dennis working, the two struggle to make ends meet. During a celebration dinner for Ash, Dennis eats some sort of food that interferes with his MAO inhibitor and causes him to have a stroke. Dennis’ psychiatrist struggles to find a new anti-depressant that will allow Dennis to function despite his disorder. Jules becomes the breadwinner for the family when Dennis loses his job. The two live in a walk up apartment until after the birth of their daughter. Jules is jealous of Ethan and Ash as they are wildly successful in their artistic careers. Jules finally takes money from Ethan at a low point in her life while Dennis is deep in depression, she is the only one working and Rory is outgrowing the corner of the living room that serves as her bedroom. She talks Dennis into using the money to buy a new, larger apartment.

Later in her life, Jules convinces Dennis to take jobs as camp directors at Spirit-in-the-Woods, the camp that she attended as a teenager. Dennis realizes more quickly than Jules that her trip back to the camp is a way for her to try to recapture her lost childhood. Once they are at the camp, Jules realizes that being a camp director is a lot of hard work. When their first year at the camp comes to an end, Jules and Dennis argue about whether or not they should remain at the camp. Dennis wants to stay but Jules does not. They decide to move back to their old lives in the city. Soon after this, Ethan is diagnosed with cancer and dies.

While Ethan nursed a crush on Jules for most of his life, Jules had a crush on Goodman Wolf most of her life. Goodman, however, becomes a fugitive after Cathy Kiplinger accuses him of raping her. The Wolf family lets Jules in on the secret that they are supporting Goodman financially while he hides out in Iceland. Ash hides this fact from her husband, Ethan. While Jules is working at the camp, Goodman shows up in the woods near the camp. Jules calls Ash to tell her that she’s seen Goodman. Ethan hears the call and learns the truth about Goodman. Jules feels guilty because she believes



she caused the breakup of her best friends' marriage. Later, when Ethan tells her that he has cancer, she instructs him to make amends with Ash, which he does.

## Ethan Figman

Ethan Figman is one of the six members of the Interestings, the group that meets up at Spirit-in-the-Woods. Ethan is described as being ugly but also very talented in animation. He also seems genuinely friendly and morally upright. From the time they meet, Ethan loves Jules. She is the first person to which he shows his animated sequence Figland the premise of which later brings him success. He challenges Jules to spend time with him and learn to love him, but she can never think of him as anything but a friend. He accepts her honesty in a gentlemanly fashion and the two remain close friends throughout their lives.

Ethan marries the beautiful Ash Wolf, a marriage that few people understand because of the vast differences in appearance between the two. Ethan has two children with Ash, a girl and a boy. The boy is diagnosed with autism which becomes a dilemma for Ethan as he somehow sees the boy's handicap as being a statement of some horrible personality characteristic of his own. Ethan even tells Jules on one occasion that he does not think that he loves Ethan. It is not until he is at the point of death from cancer that Ethan and the boy are finally able to make an emotional connection.

Ethan's adherence to his moral convictions is a characteristic that follows him through the course of his life. During one trip overseas, Ethan visits a factory that makes Figland toys. In his first tour, he sees nothing wrong at the factory besides the low wages. After he leaves, he feels something was not right so he decides to return to the factory. In his return visit, he finds that teenagers and children are working at the factory. After this discovery, Ethan moves production back to the United States. Even though he knows that many people will lose their jobs, he feels this is the decision that will cause the least harm.

While Ethan's high moral standards keep him honest in the business world, the cause problems in his relationships, particularly his relationship with his wife. Since Ash's brother, Goodman, ran from the country to avoid a trial on rape charges, the family has been keeping his whereabouts a secret. They have also been sending him money to support him. Since the time that Ethan and Ash were married, Ash's parents have left her in charge of sending money to Goodman, a job that she kept secret from Ethan. The family is afraid that if Ethan learns that they know where Goodman is, he will not only turn Goodman in, but the rest of them as well. It is not until Jules slips up one day and talks to Ash about Goodman, not realizing she was on speakerphone, and Ethan overhears. It is at this point that Ethan and Ash's marriage falls apart. A short time later, Ethan is diagnosed with cancer and Jules convinces him to reconnect with Ash, which he does. The book ends with Ethan's death.



## Dennis Boyd

Dennis Boyd is Jules' husband and Rory's father. After he meets Jules, he takes a class so he can get a job as an ultrasound technician. When he was in college, Dennis had a nervous breakdown. He spent some time in a psychiatric hospital being treated for the breakdown and depression. When he and Jules are married, he is stable with his depression controlled by a MAO inhibitor. At a celebration dinner for Ash Dennis eats some food containing a chemical that interacts with his medication and causes him to have a stroke. Because of this episode, Dennis is taken off the medication that has worked so well for him for so long. His psychiatrist searches for another antidepressant that will work as well but find nothing that will lift what they refer to as "atypical" depression.

One day at work, Dennis has an emotional breakdown and is fired after he accidentally lets a patient know that she has a serious condition. After this, Dennis becomes the stay at home parent for he and Jules' daughter Rory. It is not until after Rory returns to school that Ethan helps Dennis get into a drug test where he is given an experimental antidepressant that works for him. With help from his psychiatrist, Dennis is able to get a new job as an ultrasound technician.

One of the biggest challenges for Dennis in his relationship with Jules is probably his realization that Jules is so infatuated with her friends. Dennis is not impressed with the Wolfs and does not hesitate to tell Jules his opinion. He says he believes the family thinks they are above the law and should not be treated as common citizens. Dennis also recognizes Jules' infatuation with Goodman and is surprised when he finally meets the man. He chides his wife for allowing herself to get so caught up in a Goodman, whom he quickly realizes is sleazy.

## Jonah Bay

Jonah Bay is the son of famed folksinger Susannah Bay. He is also a member of the Interestings. When Jonah is eleven, Barry Claimes realizes the boy has a knack for making up songs and begins "borrowing" the boy from his mother. Jonah never tells anyone that during these visits, Barry gives him drugs that make him hallucinate, then records the songs and music that Jonah makes up. Jonah is smart enough that he realizes he is hallucinating because of something that Barry is giving him. After her reads a book and realizes that he is being drugged, he starts refusing to go with Barry. It is not until later that Jonah realizes that Barry stole his song ideas and has marketed them as his own. Jonah is angry and feels like he has been cheated and deceived but never tells anyone what happened.

Jonah chokes out his desire to be a musician believing that his music has been stolen and instead becomes a robotics designer. He creates robotic aids to help people who are disabled to live a more normal life. Because of the psychotropic drugs that Barry gave him, Jonah has flashbacks into his adulthood. Sex and intimacy are particularly difficult for him. He is gay and has a partner who is HIV positive but refuses to take the



relationship any further than that of a dating relationship. Jonah's partner eventually leaves him for a person who wants a more serious relationship.

During the course of his life, Jonah has a period where he becomes a member of the Unification Church. His friends retrieve him from the church work camp and have him deprogrammed so he can rejoin normal life. Jonah also seems to have a special connection with Ethan's autistic son, Mo, as he realizes that the boy has a deep and natural understanding of mechanics. Mo becomes sort of a mentor to the boy as he teaches him how to play the banjo.

## **Goodman Wolf**

Goodman Wolf is the brother of Ash Wolf. He is the son of Gil and Betsy Wolf. Throughout his life Goodman is a disappointment to his parents because he does not succeed in the way that they want. Goodman's father constantly pressures him to find something to which he can dedicate himself even though he is just a teenager. After Goodman and his one time girlfriend Cathy Kiplinger go on an "adventure" during a New Year's Eve party, Goodman is jailed on a rape charge. Unable to stand the pressure put on him, Goodman runs away from home before his case can go to trial. His parents support him in Iceland. Even in Iceland, Goodman continues to drink and do drugs, causing his parents to support both him and his drug habits.

From the beginning of their relationship, Goodman has been aware that Jules has had a crush on him. He uses this knowledge against her, choosing to crush her and make fun of her instead for his own entertainment. When Goodman calls Jules after the death of his mother, Jules begins to get creeped out by him and hangs up on him when he begins tormenting her. When Goodman learns that Jules is a director at Spirit-in-the-Woods, he makes the trip to the United States. Dennis recognizes him for the sleaze that he is and orders him to go back to Iceland.

## **Cathy Kiplinger**

Cathy Kiplinger is one member of the Interesting's. She was a dancer though she was too large chested to be successful in this field. She is described as being moody and emotional. For a short while, she and Goodman are boyfriend and girlfriend until Goodman breaks off the relationship. Cathy finds another boyfriend, but she comes to a New Year's Eve party at the Wolf home alone. During the party, she and Goodman sneak off for what they say is an "adventure." The next anyone hears from the two, Goodman is calling his parents from the police department because Cathy has accused him of raping her. Cathy agrees to meet with Jules a short time after the incident, and Cathy insists to Jules that she was raped. Jules seems to feel that Cathy is telling the truth though at the same time she feels as if Cathy has been disloyal to the group by accusing Goodman of this crime.

Much later, Jonah remarks that it is a similar situation but with the places changed when Cathy is being accused of stopping checks and insurance benefits for employees killed



in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Although Cathy swears the interruption in benefits was not intentional, people do not believe her. Jules later learns that Ethan was aware of Cathy's distress and the crimes of which she was being accused and gave her money to help her out.

## Ash Wolf Figman

Ash Wolf Figman is Ethan's wife and Jules' best friend. Although Ash does get her dream of working in arts, she also allows herself to be pushed around by her family. In fact, her stance as a feminist director who crusades for more acting and directing roles for women in the theater makes the role she takes in her family almost a paradox. She seems to blame some of her shortcomings on her family, as evidenced by her infatuation of the book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. Ash also does not take a feminist stance on Cathy's rape. While it makes sense that she would want to be supportive of her brother and not want to see what a mess that he has made of himself, she seems completely blind to the possibility that things might have happened the way Cathy said they did. Instead, she mourns the loss of her brother and puts keeping his location a secret above her marriage. Ash and Ethan have been married for several years before Ethan ever learns that Ash has known where her brother was since before they were married and that she has been sending money to him to help support him financially.

## Larkin Templeton Figman

Larkin Templeton Figman is the oldest child of Ethan and Ash Figman. She was born about three months after Jules had her baby. Larkin is a very studious and precocious girl. She shows more interest in reading books and drawing instead of being active. After Mo is born, she seems to spend a good deal of time helping her mother care for and teach Mo how to properly respond in certain situations. For instance, when Jonah spends the night with the children, it is Larkin who schools Mo on how he should react to Jonah and show sympathy for his breakup with his partner. Larkin is so upset by her father's cancer and impending death that she has to be sedated. She is probably the child who is most like Ethan as she spends much of her time drawing. A few days before his death, she gets a tattoo that pictures a collection of characters from Ethan's television show *Figland*. Ethan is at first angry with his daughter, but later realizes the act was intended to be a loving tribute.

## Barry Claimes

Barry Claimes is the man who dated Susannah Bay, Jonah's mother, for a short time. He recognized a unique musical talent in Jonah and took advantage of that talent for a short while by giving the boy psychotropic drugs. He recorded the songs that Jonah would make up while under the influence of the drugs and recorded some of them himself. Jonah happens to run into Barry at one of Ethan's Mastery Seminars and takes the opportunity to confront the man. Although Barry will not admit he has done anything



wrong, Jonah gets some sort of healing from the encounter because he is so upset by it that Ethan makes him tell what is wrong. When Ethan suggests that Barry did not steal all of Jonah's music, Jonah realizes he can still follow his dream of wanting to be a musician.

## **Morris “Mo” Tristan Figman**

Morris Tristan Figman is called “Mo” throughout his time in the novel. He is the youngest child of Ethan and Ash Figman. Mo is diagnosed as having autism, a disorder that causes him to be anxious and have a limited understanding of emotions. Because the disorder is disabling, Ethan knows the boy will never grow up to follow in his footsteps. He seems to connect the boy's emotional deformity with some sort of horribleness that he believes that he has deep inside of him. Although Ethan cannot connect with the boy and once even tells Jules that he does not believe that he loves his son, Jonah sees that the boy has potential in the area of mechanics. He becomes a mentor for the boy and teaches him how to play the banjo.

## **Lois Jacobson**

Lois Jacobson is Jules' and Ellen's mother. She does not take much of an active role in the novel. At first, she tries to discourage Jules' frequent visits to the Wolf home but stops doing so when she meets Ash. When Ash comes to visit the Jacobson home, Lois is not outwardly offended when her daughter cleans the house and hides things that are embarrassing to her. Jules responds only by thanking her daughter for the help. It is not until Jules is much older that she realizes how hard it must have been for her mother when Warren, Jules' father, died of cancer, leaving Lois to raise two girls on her own.

## **Manny and Edie Wunderlich**

Manny and Edie Wunderlich own and run the camp Spirit-in-the-Woods. Although their camp director tries to get them to modernize the camp with computers and sports, the couple refuses and insists on it remaining a camp for the arts. Ethan and Ash Figman are a source of pride for the couple as the two are examples of former campers who have gone on to become famous in arts related careers. The couple is prideful, however, and will not ask the Figmans for money for the camp even though they are struggling to keep it open.

## **Gil and Betsy Wolf**

Gil and Betsy Wolf are Goodman and Ash's parents. They enjoy giving parties and welcome Ash and Goodman's group of friends at their apartment. When they go to the police department for Goodman, Gil and Betsy at first do not want the group of friends to go with them but Ash convinces them she needs her friends for support. Gil and



Betsy also pay Jules' way to Iceland so that she can be included in the family secret that Goodman has become a fugitive but the family knows where he is.

## **Susannah Bay**

Susannah Bay is the mother of Jonah Bay. She was a folksinger known for her song "The Wind Will Carry Us." She is often a featured special guest at Spirit-in-the-Woods. By the time Jonah is an adult, his mother is struggling with the public's lack of interest in her music. When she, Ethan, Jules and Ash visit the Unification Church's camp to separate Jonah from the group, Susannah decides to stay because they admire her and her musical ability.

## **Dr. Spilka**

Dr. Spilka is Goodman's psychoanalyst. Dr. Spilka is the one who alerts the family to Goodman's disappearance when he calls to say that Goodman didn't show up for his appointment. When Jules later meets Dr. Spilka at a conference, he tells her that he believes that Goodman is guilty. He also tells Jules that Goodman killed the girl whom he raped. Although Dr. Spilka's daughter tells Jules that her father has the beginnings of dementia, Jules is still chilled by the doctor's certainty of Goodman's guilt.

## **Noelle Russo**

Noelle Russo is the girl who attends Spirit-in-the-Woods the summer that Jules and Dennis are the camp directors. She is a dancer and is anorexic. She is finally sent home because of the severity of her eating disorder. Before she leaves, Noelle accidentally lets the llamas out in an attempt to make the point that having to leave the camp is unfair to her.

## **Gudrun Sigurdsdottir**

Gudrun Sigurdsdottir is a lifeguard at Spirit-in-the-Woods. On one visit to Boys Teepee 3, Gudrun breaks up a meeting of the Interstings. On another visit, she stays and chats with them. It is Gudrun who takes Goodman back to Iceland with her after he runs from his rape charge and turns up at the abandoned campground. While he is getting his feet on the ground, Goodman stays with Gudrun and her husband.

## **Old Mo Templeton**

Old Mo Templeton is the animation teacher at Spirit-in-the-Woods during Ethan's time there. It is said that he worked with Walt Disney. Mo Templeton is Ethan's mentor in the business. When Mo becomes sick, Ethan stays with the man to help take care of him





until his death. It is for this reason that Ethan is unable to make the trip to Iceland when the family visits Goodman.

## **Ellen Jacobson**

Ellen Jacobson is Jules' older sister. Jules remembers being haughty toward her family when she returned from her first summer at camp. She believes this is why Ellen acted so hatefully toward her until one day, as adults, Ellen admits to Jules that she was just a bitch in her teens. Nothing Jules had done was the cause of her hateful attitude.

## **Isadora Topfeldt**

Isadora Topfeldt is the mutual friend who introduces Dennis and Jules to one another at a party. Isadora also tells Jules about Dennis' nervous breakdown and time spent in a psychiatric hospital. Isadora is killed in a traffic accident in 2002. Dennis and Jules do not learn of her death until four years later when Jules looks for her on the Internet.

## **Warren Jacobson**

Warren Jacobson is Jules Jacobson's father. He dies of cancer the winter before Jules' first summer at Spirit-in-the-Woods. It is because of her father's death that Jules is allowed to go to the camp. Jules is able to get a scholarship to cover the tuition. Her mother reasons that someone in the family should enjoy themselves that summer.

## **Aurora Maude Jacobson-Boyd**

Aurora "Rory" Maude Jacobson-Boyd is the only child of Jules and Dennis. She is full of life and active. She enjoys playing sports and being outside. She finally goes to college hoping to become a park ranger.

## **Robert Takahshi**

Robert Takahshi is Jonah Bay's partner. He is HIV positive. After he lives several years longer than he was expected, Robert decides he wants a closer relationship than the one he has with Jonah. He breaks up with Jonah at an awards ceremony.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Interestings

The Interestings are a group of friends who meet during a summer camp. The original group includes Ash and Goodman Wolf, Cathy Kiplinger, Jonah Bay, Ethan Figman, and Julie “Jules” Jacobson.

## The Sandbox

The Sandbox is the play in which Jules gets the part of the grandmother during her time at Spirit-in-the-Woods. It is Jules’ shining moment as an actress.

## Ash and Ethan’s Christmas Letter

Ash and Ethan send out letters outlining their family’s yearly activities each Christmas. Manny and Edie look forward to the letter because it shows them that at least two of their campers were successful in the arts. Jules, however, dreads this letter because it reminds her that she did not make a name for herself in an art related field.

## Figland

Figland is the name Ethan gives to his animated cartoon that he creates in his teens. As an adult, it is through Figland that Ethan makes a name for himself.

## Mastery Seminars

The Mastery Seminars are art related lectures sponsored by Ethan and his company.

## Pervasive Developmental Disorder

Pervasive Developmental Disorder is the type of autism with which Mo is diagnosed.

## Unification Church

During his college years, Jonah has a short period in which he becomes a member of the Unification Church. During a trip to the group’s compound to retrieve Jonah, Jonah’s mother decides to join the group because they appreciate her music.



## **Clark's Teaberry Gum**

Clark's Teaberry Gum is one of the vehicles through which Barry Claimes dispenses hallucinogenic drugs to Jonah while he is trying to get the boy to write songs for him.

## **The Doors of Perception**

The Doors of Perception is the book that Jonah reads to try to learn how Barry has been drugging him.

## **Tell Them You Won't Go (My Lad)**

Tell Them You Won't Go (My Lad) is one of the songs that Jonah makes up when Barry has him on drugs. Barry makes money on the song without acknowledging Jonah's part in it.

## **Behind the Green Door**

Behind the Green Door is the porno movie that Jonah and Ash watch to try to learn about sex.

## **John**

John is the name that Goodman takes as a fugitive.

## **The Drama of the Gifted Child**

The Drama of the Gifted Child is a book that Ash becomes infatuated with believing that it relates to her childhood.

## **Walk-in Refrigerator**

When Ethan begins to earn money through his animation, one of the first extravagant purchases he makes is a walk-in refrigerator.

## **Seymour Glass**

Seymour Glass is the band with which Jonah played while in college. He quit the band when it began to gain popularity.



## **Open Hand**

Open Hand is the theater with which Ash works.

## **Batphone**

Ash has a secret cellphone, which she calls the Batphone, that she uses to call Goodman so Ethan won't know the two are in contact.

## **Stabilivox**

Stabilivox is the anti-depressant that finally relieves Dennis' depression after he has to be taken off the MAO inhibitor that had worked for him for so long.

## **Melanoma**

Ethan tells Jules that he has cancer, a melanoma.



# Settings

## Boy's Teepee 3

The Interestings meet in Boy's Teepee 3. When Jules returns to the camp as the director, she visits this teepee but finds it small and dank.

## Spirit-in-the-Woods

Spirit-in-the-Woods is the name of an arts camp which Jules attends for several summers. It is at this camp that the Interestings meet. Jules and her husband later serve as the camp directors for one summer.

## The Animation Shed

The animation shed is where Ethan spends much of his time at the Spirit-in-the-Woods. It is in this shed that Ethan first tries to kiss Jules. Later, Ethan's office is named The Animation Shed.

## Cindy Drive

Cindy Drive is the street in Underhill where Jules lives with her mother and sister.

## Langdon Hull Psychiatric Hospital

Langdon Hull Psychiatric Hospital is a hospital near Spirit-in-the-Woods where Dennis was treated for his first depressive episode.

## Belknap

Belknap is the town where both Spirit-in-the-Woods and Langdon Hull Psychiatric Hospital are located.

## Tavern on the Green

It is during an adventure at the Tavern on the Green that Cathy claims Goodman rapes her.



## **Iceland**

Iceland is the country to which Goodman flees to avoid his rape charges.

## **Café Benedikt**

Café Benedikt is the café in Iceland where Jules meets Goodman's family and realizes that he has chosen to become a fugitive and his family is supporting him.

## **Wickersham Hotel**

It is at the Wickersham Hotel that Ethan arranges for Jonah to be reprogrammed from the influence of the Unification Church.

## **Labyrinth**

The Labyrinth is the name the Wolfs have given to their apartment building.

## **Leena Toys Factory**

It is at Leena Toys Factory that Ethan realizes that child labor is being used to make his Figland products.



# Themes and Motifs

## Topics Addressed

One of the remarkable things about this novel is the number of topics that it addresses. Friendship, family relations, love, parent-child relationships, finding one's soulmate and even loneliness are touched on in the novel. Heterosexual relationships as well as homosexual relationships are also explored. In Jonah's case, the book even details the break up of a homosexual relationship. The novel includes an emphasis on precautions to take when having sexual relationships with someone who is HIV positive.

Autism is a disability that is explored in the novel. The author not only includes a nod to a special talent that Mo possesses but also outlines how an autistic person acts and why he acts as he does. Also noted are the two stances parents often taken when dealing with a handicapped child. They often become either too involved to the exclusion of their spouse, as Ash does, or they try to avoid the situation, as Ethan does, leaving Ash to make all of the decisions. Along the lines of disorders and diseases, depression is another disorder that gets special attention in the novel. Dennis' story shows the reader that even those with emotional problems can go on to live a normal life. As is the case with Dennis, there is always the possibility of relapse.

Cults and the importance of belonging to group is another topic addressed in the novel. Although it is not a cult, The Interestings are a group of which Jules is pleased to be a member. They give her a sense of belonging and acceptance. While this group is normal in that it is a friendship where members are free to come and go as they please, Jules seems to base her identity even as an adult on being a part of this group. The cult is addressed when Jonah joins the Unification Church. After just a short time there, he is brainwashed by the leaders to think that is where he wants to be. Consider this outcome since Jonah was hesitant about going to the farm at all. Jonah's mother is angry with her son for joining the group and goes with some of his friends to try to reason with him and make him leave. Although Susannah is at first appalled by the group, when they begin to praise her for her music and give her the attention that she has been longing for, she quickly decides to join. These two examples show how persuasive members of a cult can be when trying to recruit new members.

Drugs and drug use are addressed. Though Jonah does not take the hallucinogenic drugs willingly, he suffers the long-term effects of the drugs. He has flash backs and hallucinates for years after he has gotten away from Barry and his spiked chewing gum. Through the use of the drugs and the manipulation Jonah suffered at the hands of Barry, Jonah is never the same emotionally. It is not until years later when he finally tells Ethan what happened to him that Jonah is able to enjoy music again.



## Arts Versus Technology

One theme that is detailed in the novel is the idea that arts and technology are at odds with one another. This is especially noted in the section of the novel where Manny and Edie fire their camp director. Manny and Edie want a traditional arts camp while the director wants a change in the curriculum to include more computers and more technology. He believes that it is archaic that the campers who study animation are still forced to draw out their ideas instead of being able to use computer animation. Manny and Edie make the point that Ethan Figman got his start drawing his animations, and became a great success.

It is also suggested that in the modern world, it is hard to make a living in an arts related field. For instance, when Ethan meets the boy at the Mastery Seminar who wants to be an animator, he tells the boy he might consider another field. Ethan feels later as if he has been mean to the boy when in reality, he probably realizes how few people actually make a living in the field of animation. Ethan has felt his success in the field was a fluke from the start. Also note Ash's response to a mother whose daughter wants to work in the theater. The mother is hinting that Ash discourage her daughter from perusing that type of work but Ash instead scolds the mother. She tells the woman that enough people will criticize the girl for her choice that her mother does not need to be one of these negative voices. She encourages the mother to support her daughter in her dreams.

## Two Sides

The idea that there are two sides to everything that happens is another theme that is addressed in the novel. While an occurrence, such as Ethan's climb to fame, is a good thing for Ethan and Ash, it has a negative effect on others. One specific example is the Christmas letters that the couple sends out each year. While Manny and Edie look forward to these letters because they let them know that at least a few of their former campers are succeeding in the arts, the letters are a source of disparity for Jules. They serve as a reminder to her that she was not able to survive in a field that she loved while others that she studied alongside are now living their dreams.

Although both Jules and Dennis suffer greatly through his relapse into depression, even this dark time in their life has an up side. Dennis lost his job after an emotional outburst and does not believe he is hireable in his depressed condition. For this reason, Dennis becomes a stay at home dad, taking care of the young Rory while Jules is the money earner. Jules indicates that the situation is actually good because Dennis seems to relate to the young child well even though he tries to stay away from adult interactions. Additionally, the couple isn't having to spend their money on a babysitter or daycare.

Mo's condition is another aspect of the novel that has two sides. Ethan finds it difficult to love the child or relate to him because he feels the boy has somehow inherited all of his awkwardness and ugliness. It is almost as if Ethan feels responsible for the way that Mo has turned out. Ash, on the other hand, devotes her life to seeing that Mo has the best





care and schooling he can get. Ethan's parents seem him as disabled but it is Jonah who recognizes that even Mo has his own special talents. He sees the boy's natural ability to understand mechanics. In his relations with Mo, Jonah also turns around his own experience with Barry. Although Barry had exploited Jonah through his pretended "mentorship" of the boy, Jonah is sincere in his desire to teach Mo to play the banjo. Because of Jonah's own emotional instability, he relates well to the disabled boy.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is written from the third person point of view of an omniscient narrator. Since the story covers the differing lives of six friends from summer camp, this is the only way the story would have worked. No one character could have told the stories of the others without being biased. In the third person point of view, the narrator is able to tell the story not only as it seems to one, individual character but is able to delve into the thoughts and emotions of each character.

Significantly more of the story is told through exposition than dialogue as the author takes the time to explore characters' thoughts and emotions about the situations in which they find themselves. It is this exposition that gives the book much of its depth. It is also through these expository passages, which sometimes seem almost like a stream of consciousness, that the author maneuvers through changes in time and place. This is particularly true in the first chapters of the novel. For example, in Chapter Six, the author takes her reader effortlessly from eleven-year-old Jonah being fed drugs by Barry to four years later when the group of camp friends is visiting the Labyrinth for the first time. When it is noticed that the topic has settled back on the trip to the Labyrinth, the reader may feel the need to look back through the chapter to remember exactly how they got there.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel could best be described as some formal version of stream of consciousness. The writer weaves her way through the story, including odd details and asides, that effortlessly takes the reader through a variety of times and places without being jerky or disjointed. The sentences tend to be longer than average length and tend to give a main idea, then include related phrases that flesh out this idea.

## Structure

The book consists of twenty-two chapters divided into three different main parts. The first part of the novel details the way the camp friends met. It also fast-forwards to the present day positions of couples Ethan and Ash, and Dennis and Jules. This first part of the novel is nine chapters long and accounts for roughly 40 percent of the novel. The second part of the novel describes Ethan and Ash's rise to fame as well as the problems that Jules and Dennis encounter that keep them from getting ahead in life. Part two of the novel contains eight chapters. It is the longest section of the novel, accounting for about 45 percent of the text. The final part of the novel details the way that both couples encounter problems in their relationships as well as the way with which these problems are dealt. At the conclusion of the novel, Ethan dies of cancer. Ash returns a storyboard

that Ethan had drawn about Jules the friends' first year in camp together, bringing the story full circle.

The plot of the novel is very difficult and contains a variety of subplots that weave the lives of the six friends together, or in the case of Goodman and Cathy, draw them apart. The author uses the novel as a vehicle to touch on a variety of topics including depression, rape, homosexuality, drug use, autism, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, cancer, and even death.



## Quotes

But Cathy was also their friend, and even though she occupied a slightly odd role in the group — the sexual, moody dancer, the emotionally overwhelming girl — she was one of them, and she wouldn't do such a vindictive thing to Goodman, and yet for some reason she had.

-- Narrator (Part One, Chapter Eight paragraph 13)

**Importance:** Although Cathy claims that she has been raped, many of the members of the group believe that Cathy is being vindictive in saying that Goodman raped her. Although it is Cathy who has possibly been violated, it is as if the group members feel their group unity has been violated because Cathy has accused Goodman of a crime.

There were six people altogether in this single-bulb-lit conical wooden structure. They would meet again whenever they could over the rest of the summer, and frequently in New York City over the next year and a half. There would be one more summer for all of them. After that, over the following thirty-odd years, only four of them would meet whenever they could, but of course it would be entirely different.

-- Narrator (Part one, Chapter One paragraph 27)

**Importance:** This quote is significant because it basically sums up the premise of the novel. The storyline follows the very different lives of six friends who meet up on even territory at a summer camp for the arts.

There it was, right there: the effortless shift that made all the difference. Shy, suburban nonentity Julie Jacobson, who had provoked howls for the first time in her life, had suddenly, lightly changed into Jules, which was a far better name for an awkward-looking fifteen-year-old girl who'd become desperate for people to pay attention to her.

-- Narrator (Part one, Chapter one paragraph 87)

**Importance:** When Ash calls Julie by the nickname "Jules" during the first meeting of the Interestings, Julie takes this as her new name. The change in name signifies a shift from the Julie who was insignificant in the light of a father dying of cancer to Jules, who has friends who want her with them and think she is clever.

People who had gone to Spirit-in-the-Woods, even people who hadn't been their close friends there, represented the world of art and artistic possibilities.

-- Narrator (Part One, Chapter Four paragraph 154)

**Importance:** This quote is significant because it sets up Spirit-in-the-Woods and the people who attended the camp as being representative of arts and the artistic.

At age twelve Jonah looked back on the previous year of his life with the dreadful comprehension that over all that time he had been slowly fed drugs by a folksinger — psychotropics — and his mind had been stretched and distorted, his thoughts pushed into the mesh of a perceptual net whose shape had been changed by the hallucinogens



Barry Claimes had been giving him for his own purposes.  
-- Narrator (Part One, Chapter Six paragraph 61)

**Importance:** Even at his young age, Jonah realizes the terrible things that Barry has done to him by drugging him in order for him to produce music. The ability to figure out what Barry's been doing to him at such a young age not only shows Jonah's intelligence but also helps the reader to understand why Jonah has trouble trusting other people.

I wish I could tell you something else, but I wouldn't be telling the truth. My wise and gentle friends, this is the way it will be from now on.  
-- Gudrun Sigurdottir (Part One, Chapter Seven paragraph 91)

**Importance:** One day, when the only slightly older counselor from Iceland joins the Interestings in one of their meetings, she admits to the group that their lives as adults, won't be much different, heart ache wise than they are now.

But go lie down with all of them and get some sleep. I'll take care of you.' The words were said lightly but with feeling; he was signing on, this was the moment it happened, and Jules saw it but didn't know it.  
-- Ethan (Part One, Chapter Eight paragraph 11)

**Importance:** This is significant because it is at this point when Ethan tries to comfort and cheer Ash after her brother's arrest that the couple's love affair begins.

Honest, Jules,' said Cathy, 'it's like you just don't know anything. You're just so goony about him, and about Ash, and about good old Betsy and Gil. You think they all saved you from a boring life. But unlike you, I don't despise my family. I actually love them.  
-- Cathy (Part One, Chapter Eight paragraph 48)

**Importance:** Cathy neatly, and bluntly, sums up the truth about Jules in this statement. She believes that Jules is so blinded by her admiration of the Wolfs that she can't see the truth. Cathy does not realize that her meeting with Jules has a bigger impact on the younger, less emotionally mature girl than she could have imagined. Jules comes away from their talk considering the fact that Goodman might have done the act of which Cathy accused him.

Ash was describing an enclosed world that Jules too had been given a chance to enter, but hadn't wanted to. She still didn't want to, but the descriptions of the closeness and intensity of that world only increased her loneliness.  
-- Narrator (Part One, Chapter Nine paragraph 23)

**Importance:** Even though Jules had not wanted a relationship with Ethan, she is still lonely when Ethan and Ash pair up because she is alone on the outside of a relationship that she doesn't understand.

Love transcended all of this, apparently. Love transcended breath, eczema, fear of sex, and an imbalance in physical appearance.



-- Narrator (Part One, Chapter Nine paragraph 25)

**Importance:** Again, in her lack of experience, Jules mulls how the beautiful Ash could be attracted to someone as physically unattractive as Ethan.

If I told Ethan about Goodman, he might think he had to report it or something, out of respect for Cathy. Report all of us. Have us taken away and put on a chain gang.

-- Ash (Part One, Chapter Nine paragraph 99)

**Importance:** Ash explains to Jules that the family has chosen not to tell Ethan that they know where Goodman is because they are afraid that he is so morally straight that he will turn Goodman in.

They couldn't suddenly realize the depth and breadth of their error, the fact that they had mistakenly offered him, of all people — uncool, unbeautiful Ethan Figman — a very large sum of money to do what he'd always done anyway, at least in his head.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Ten paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Although a season of his show has already been ordered, Ethan is still nervous, worried that the people will suddenly realize what a mistake they'd made in choosing his ideas as ones that would be popular especially since he thinks has always been considered uncool and unpopular as a person.

Looking across the room at Jules sometimes, Ethan felt as if the selves they'd inhabited at age fifteen were still thoroughly present. He could still kiss her, he realized, and then he immediately told himself: banish this thought.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Ten paragraph 20)

**Importance:** Even though Ethan is happily married to Ash, he still finds himself longing for the relationship he had wanted with Jules.

I like Ash, of course, she's a good friend to you and everything, but I don't like her and her family as a thing. A unit.

-- Dennis (Part Two, Chapter Eleven paragraph 33)

**Importance:** After Jules tells Dennis that she is part of the Wolf family secret of Goodman's location, Dennis admits to her that he hasn't ever particularly liked the Wolf family.

Leave everything to Ash and Ethan, for they deserve it. Just give me what we had, she heard herself thinking, or maybe saying. It's enough now.

-- Jules (Part Two, Chapter Eleven paragraph 75)

**Importance:** Although Jules has been so jealous of Ash and Ethan for their money, when she faces the loss of her husband, she realizes how much more important he is than any amount of riches.



Ever since he'd been taken off the MAOI five years earlier, Dennis had rarely returned to buoyancy. Instead, he still struggled with what his pharmacologist variously referred to as 'low-level depression,' 'atypical depression,' and 'dysthymia.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Thirteen paragraph 89)

**Importance:** Dennis' depression returns after he has been taken off his MAO inhibitor. Even though his doctor experiments with a variety of different medications, they don't quickly find a medication that completely controls his depression.

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-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Thirteen paragraph 122)

**Importance:** Dennis' depression returns after he has been taken off his MAO inhibitor. Even though his doctor experiments with a variety of different medications, they don't quickly find a medication that completely controls his depression.

Then, coming down further from the nasty little high, she felt even guiltier as she reminded herself that Ash and Ethan's life might be vast and miraculous, but their marriage had a locked room in it, inside of which was not only the withheld information about Goodman but also the full freight of Ash's ache about Goodman.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Thirteen paragraph 122)

**Importance:** Although Jules is highly jealous of Ethan and Ash's lifestyle, she reminds herself that there are still problems even in that marriage. In Ethan and Ash's case, it is the fact that Ethan doesn't know that Ash is supporting her fugitive brother.

He was guilty,' said Dr. Spilka. Jules stared at him, and he stared right back. His gaze was even and cool, a tortoise's ancient gaze; hers was shocked.

-- Dr. Spilka (Part Two, Chapter Thirteen paragraph 136)

**Importance:** Although his daughter tells Jules that Dr. Spilka is suffering with the beginnings of dementia, Jules is still chilled when Dr. Spilka swears that Goodman is guilty of Cathy's rape.

The conditions at the Leena Toys Factory at Kompleks DK2 in Jakarta were dismal by anyone's reckoning, but nothing seemed extraordinarily outrageous— not that 'extraordinarily outrageous' was a legal, technical, specific description.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Fourteen paragraph 48)

**Importance:** Upon Ethan's first tour of this toy factory, he believes everything is as it should be except the wages are too low. He begins to get a strange feeling about the original tour, however, and returns to find that children and teenagers are employed at the factory.



Ethan and Ash had two children, a boy and a girl, like the Wolfs; and just as Goodman's lack of discipline had been intolerable to Gil Wolf, Mo's problems made Ethan feel as if the world would now see his own distorted nature, revealed through his son.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Fourteen paragraph 66)

**Importance:** In this quote, the author draws a parallel between Goodman's relationship with his father and Ethan's relationship with his son. Ethan believes that the world will be able to recognize how ugly and distorted he is as it has become evident in his son.

And the child who was happy with herself meant the parents had won the jackpot. Rory and Larkin might well do fine; Mo, with his long, anxious face and active fingers — who knew?

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Fifteen paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Jules thinks to herself that she is lucky because Rory is a happy, well-adjusted child. She also believes that Larkin will do well in life, but she is worried that there is not a future for Mo.

Right away he saw that Mo possessed a visceral understanding of mechanics that went deep and wide.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Sixteen paragraph 56)

**Importance:** As Jonah talks to Mo about the machine he has built with his Legos, Jonah realizes that the boy has a natural understanding of mechanics.

He ached to have lived here, to have had parents like Ash and Ethan and not like his mother, who'd been well-intentioned but unable to save him from being ripped off and diminished.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Sixteen paragraph 57)

**Importance:** Jonah seems to believe that if he had lived in a family like that of Ethan and Ash, he would not have had the experience that he had with Barry.

Racists and xenophobes think multiculturalism is the enemy of America, but you guys think technology is the enemy of art, which is also not true.

-- Paul Wheelwright (Part Two, Chapter Seventeen paragraph 14)

**Importance:** In this quote, Paul tries to convince Manny and Edie that they are wrong in their belief that technology and art cannot co-exist.

Spirit-in-the-Woods was the camp that would not die, the camp that would not leave her, so instead she'd decided to go there, to become it.

-- Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Seventeen paragraph 76)

**Importance:** Jules seems to think that by returning to Spirit-in-the-Woods she can recapture her lost youth.





Him finding out about Goodman just cracked everything open that's been there in front of us.

-- Ash (Part Three, Chapter Twenty paragraph 105)

**Importance:** Ash explains to Jules that when Ethan found out the truth about Goodman, it caused them to bring up everything in the marriage that displeased either of them, which led to a separation.

But here's one thing I keep thinking about: Ash is this big feminist director, and yet she never seriously considered Cathy Kiplinger's version of what happened with Goodman. And that was never a contradiction for her.

-- Ethan (Part Three, Chapter Twenty-One paragraph 56)

**Importance:** Ethan explains to Jules a contradiction that he has detected in his wife's personality that he finds confusing. This contradiction demonstrates what a strong hold Ash's family had over her. She would ignore even her own convictions to believe that they were honest.