

# **Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key Study Guide**

**Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key by Jack Gantos**

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# Plot Summary

"Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key" by Jack Gantos is the story of young Joey Pigza, who suffers from attention deficit disorder. The story follows Joey, showing the journey of a boy on a path of destruction who through medication, care, and behavioral modification is able to become a productive member of his class.

Joey tells the story and knows that he is not like other children. He knows that his actions sometimes are wrong, but he feels unable to control himself. Joey is not a bad child, but his actions often lead to bad results. His medication for ADHD appear to last only through the morning, and his afternoon behavior is therefore out of control. His father abandoned him and his mother when Joey was in kindergarten. Joey's mother, Fran, who is an alcoholic, followed his father, and left Joey in the care of his grandmother. Years later she returned, and attempted to smoothly transition herself back into the role as primary caregiver. While she was away, however, she learns that her mother physically and mentally abused Joey. While this was not the cause of his misbehavior, it did have an effect. Ms. Pigza settles in, but Grandma cannot tolerate the new rules of her household. After attempting to close Joey in a refrigerator one day, Grandma leaves, and does not return. Ms. Pigza explains that his grandmother, too, is hyperactive, as is his father, Carter.

Joey's actions often involve decisions that only hurt himself. One day he absentmindedly swallows his house key. On another, he attempts to sharpen his finger in a pencil sharpener, and is cut. His teachers, attempting to find a solution, place him into a special education class for several hours each day, in the hopes that he can learn how to behave like other children. However during an outing to an Amish farm, Joey eats an entire pie, jumps from a loft, and sprains his ankle. Finally, Joey is running with scissors in a classroom when he trips, and cuts off the end of another student's nose. Unable to tolerate his behavior any longer, the school sends Joey to a special education school, where he can learn to make better decisions and where the staff is better able to treat his ADHD.

Joey is introduced to several special education students, as well as to Mr. Ed Vanness, a caseworker. Special Ed explains to Joey that to help him, they have to help him find the right medication, and test him to make sure he is being properly treated. Ed explains to him that his home life is part of the problem, as are his past experiences. Joey is taken to see a doctor, who refers him to another doctor in Pittsburgh for a SPECT test or a brain scan. The scans show his brain is normal, and he is given a patch that doses his medication continuously throughout the day. Joey begins to finally believe he can improve. He knows he cannot be cured, but also knows that by making good decisions and taking his medication, he can be like other children.



# Off the Wall and Family Tree

## Off the Wall and Family Tree Summary

"Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key" is the story of a young boy, Joey Pigza, who has troubles with concentration and behaviors. He is not a bad boy but cannot seem to control his actions, even though he is medicated for attention deficit disorder. Through special education and a caseworker named Ed Vanness, Joey learns that to control his behavior, he must learn to cope with his past and his home life, and make better decisions.

In "Off the Wall," Joey Pigza admits he is "wired wrong" and that he feels unable to control his behavior most of the time. He takes his medication in the morning, but by the afternoon, he is bouncing off the walls. After being rude to his teacher, Mrs. Maxy, she sends him to the hall, where he continues to misbehave. After trying to spin himself like the Tasmanian Devil and making extremely loud noises, he is given one more chance to calm down. Failing this by again spinning like a top into the lockers, Joey is punished by the principal.

In "Family Tree," Joey explains that his father left the family when Joey was in kindergarten and that his mother left as well, leaving him in the care of his grandmother. The previous summer, Joey's mother returned and moved back into the home. She began making several rules for both grandmother and Joey and the family fought bitterly. Joey admits he was "wired wrong" by the time his mother returned, but notes that it is not his grandmother's fault. He believes he has inherited his behavior from his father, Carter, as well as from his grandmother. He knows from his grandmother's description that his father "bounced off the walls," but he wishes his father would return so he could see this for himself. However, Joey knows his grandmother was wired like him, because they often were partners in their hyperactivity. They were messy, unorganized, and the home was always cluttered. Joey admits grandma could be funny, like when she would pretend to be a fly when caught in one of his string spider webs he liked to string across doorways, but is generally mean. She yells at him often for the way he was and neither of them ever finish anything. Joey recalls his grandmother believing pink would calm him, so she started to paint his room pink. She does not finish however, and Joey would instead spend hours looking into the pink paint can, trying to calm himself. Following his mother's return, Grandma becomes meaner and yells more often until one day, she attempts to lock him into the refrigerator. When Joey refuses, she storms out, and never returns. Joey and Ms. Pigza can only find her shoe near a gutter but they do not call the police.

Joey feels horrible about this and yells into the sewer that he is sorry and that he forgives her. Ms. Pigza explains to Joey that grandma's way of expressing her hyperactivity is through her words and that she often hurts others with what she says. Joey admits now that he is dependent on his mother, who understands his illness. While preparing for school, Joey begins leaping from the bed to the floor and his mother



immediately comes in, pins him to the ground gently, and offers him his medication. He continues to misbehave by trying to run through a door with a ladder, but his mother lets him let out his energy, noting that even as a child, he had difficulty "getting a square peg into a square hole."

## Off the Wall and Family Tree Analysis

"Off the Wall" introduces Joey Pigza, a young boy who clearly has attention problems. From this first chapter alone, readers can see the extent of Joey's illness. His behaviors towards his teacher, his bouncing of a ball in the hallway, and his attempts to spin himself like the Tasmanian devil show he is hyper, with nowhere to focus his attention. It is clear he knows his medications do not work throughout the day, but there appears little Joey is able to do to stop his bad behavior. Mrs. Maxy, his teacher, appears to try to help calm him, but to no avail. Although he is punished, it is already clear that punishment for a child like Joey will have little effect.

"Family Tree" gives readers more of an insight into Joey's life, and helps to explain his behaviors. From Joey's descriptions of his grandmother, it is clear she not only was hyperactive, but she was also abusive, although Joey seems not to think this way. His descriptions of her holding him by the years, her yelling at him, and her overall treatment of him seem matter of fact, and although he admits she is mean, he does not use the word abuse. Still, it is clear her words have had an effect on Joey, and on how he sees himself. Further, readers are informed that Joey was left by both his mother and his father as a young child. This, too, has had a drastic effect on Joey, although the true extent of this is not revealed until later in the novel. Joey resented his mother when she returned, as did his grandmother, and for a third time, Joey is abandoned by someone in his life. Joey's clear sorrow at the leaving of grandma, despite her abuse of him, shows that Joey accepts people for who they are, foreshadowing his relationship with special education students later in the novel. This chapter also helps readers understand the depth of Joey's problems. His inability to pay attention and stay on task means he is unable to finish projects, bouncing from one thing to the next. His homework remains mostly undone, the home is cluttered, and he has difficulty concentrating on anything logical. However, he is able to focus on inanimate objects such as pink paint for hours again showing there is a problem with Joey's ability to focus.

This chapter also introduces readers to Joey's mother. After abandoning her child, Ms. Pigza returns years later to pick up where she left off. She is not mean to Joey and understands his behaviors. However, her understanding does not necessarily translate into proper action. When Joey is smashing the ladder into the doorjamb, his mother does not stop him but instead lets him expend his energy. Instead of finding him a safer and more suitable outlet, his mother is content to medicate him and wait it out. This foreshadows events in the novel as Ms. Pigza learns she is part of Joey's problems.



# Handful and Go Fish

## Handful and Go Fish Summary

In "Handful", the teachers and Ms. Pigza have a meeting before the first day of school to determine what to do about Joey. Joey thinks that it is unfair that everyone believes he is a handful and notes all the good things he does, such as rolling up car windows when it rains, killing classroom spiders, helping unload supplies, and other duties. Ms. Pigza believes Joey can start anew, and learn to behave better once he is medicated. Ms. Maxy watches him closely the first day and although he acts normally during the morning, while his medication is working, it is clear his medication has worn off by afternoon. Ms. Maxy explains to Joey the rules, which include not fidgeting, not touching others, not making noise, and other behavioral rules. She tapes them to his desk, but the next day, Joey is again agitated. To give him an alternate outlet for his energy when he starts spinning in his chair and disrupting class, Ms. Maxy allows him to sharpen the pencils. Soon however, Joey is sharpening the pencils to the eraser, sharpening chalk, and Popsicle sticks. He decides to sharpen his fingernails and cuts himself. Agitated now, Joey begins trying to hide his finger as he hops from one foot to the other, while Ms. Maxy tries to calm him. He is taken to the nurse, and Ms. Maxy explains to him that hurting himself is bad. He attempts to explain that it was an accident, but Ms. Maxy points out that Joey's accidents are often the result of his lack of attention, and his hyperactivity, and that he someday could hurt someone else. He is warned that another incident will lead to special education classrooms. When Joey tells his mother, she expresses sadness, and comforts him. When asked, Joey prepares what she calls "her medicine," which is an Amarillo sour. Joey notes Ms. Pigza helped Joey obtain his medication after the meeting with the school and at first, the medication helped but over a short time, it stopped working consistently. Joey's mother tells him, after taking a sip, that his Grandmother left with his father the day she disappeared.

In "Go Fish," Joey is playing with his house key, which he finds magical. He is home two hours before his mother, so needs the key to let himself in, since the children in the neighborhood are mean to him. Joey begins to swallow his key, and use the string it is on to pull it back up. He gags occasionally, but continues, hoping his lunch will get stuck to it so he can see it. Ms. Maxy notices, and cuts the string, placing the key back in his pocket, but Joey continues with his fun. He realizes soon however that there is no string, and that he has swallowed his house key with no way to retrieve it. The nurse gives him Ipecac to force him to vomit, but the key does not appear. It is decided that nature will take its course. Joey is told by the principal, Mrs. Jarzab, that he needs help, and that he is being sent to special education. He is taken to a room filled with children who are disabled mentally, physically, or emotionally, and Joey is scared. Mrs. Howard, the special education instructor, asks to see how long he can sit in the Big Quiet Chair, which is a large chair in the room. Joey is fine at first, but eventually begins to become hyper, and kicks at the chair legs which are bolted to the floor. His sneakers are removed and he is given soft slippers to wear. Joey notices the mothers in the room taking care of their children look at him sadly, and he knows they feel sorry for him. He



angrily continues to kick at the chair until he tires, and falls asleep. Joey is sent back to class, and feels hyper, but fears if he acts out, he will be sent permanently to special education, so he tries his hardest just to sit until the bell rings. At home, he mixes his mother a drink, and she receives a phone call from the school.

## Handful and Go Fish Analysis

"Handful" reveals a number of new factors about Joey and about his life. Joey is saddened by the news that his teachers wish to avoid him and he rightfully points out that they use his hyper nature to their advantage, but then complain of it when it does not fit their needs. This is a valid point and does show one of the pitfalls of such actions by teachers, in that they appear to encourage his usefulness, but reject him when the cause of his usefulness goes against them. It is clear from the beginning, however, that Mrs. Maxy wants to help Joey, and wants him to succeed. Her efforts, however, are nullified by Joey's continued bad behavior. Her attempts to give him an outlet for his hyper activity are good, but Joey continues to find ways to harm himself in his lack of attention to detail. It is apparent that she and the nurse both fear Joey's problem will cause him to harm himself or others consistently. His mother's reaction in this chapter shows Ms. Pigza is at a loss with her son. She clearly loves him and wants him to be well, but she is saddened by him at the same time. She wishes for him to be "normal" and has difficulty parenting him. This chapter also introduces Ms. Pigza's drinking problem. Although she attempts to disguise her drinking as "medicine," it is clear she uses alcohol to help her cope with her problems and with her son. The revelation that Grandma left with Joey's father leaves Joey feeling somewhat betrayed.

Joey's continued lack of care for himself results in his swallowing of his house key in "Go Fish." Again, Joey's inability to focus on a situation causes him not to think out the entire situation, but simply to act in the moment. It is clear Joey's behaviors are getting worse, foreshadowing events later when he accidentally harms another student. As warned, Joey is taken to special education. However, Joey can see no relationship between himself and the students in class. The children in special education are clearly disabled, whereas Joey believes he is not. He is frightened, and feels punished and abused for something he believes is out of his control. However, he again shows his inability to focus and follow directions when he fidgets in the Big Quiet Chair. The removal of Joey's shoes seems a final shove to him, in that he feels as though others look at him with sympathy, not believing he can get better. His angry outburst at this shows his own belief that he is beyond help, and his fear and shame show Joey is not a bad person, but simply one who needs help. Joey himself has no faith that he can improve and as a result, he continues to act out. Joey does not tell his mother, which again shows he is ashamed of his new situation.





# Make a Wish and Who

## Make a Wish and Who Summary

The following morning, Joey defecates and his key passes into his stool. At school, he entertains the children by swallowing his newly recovered and washed off key, but when he brings it back up and bounces the spaghetti sticking to it from his stomach up and down, he is sent to the nurse to wash his mouth. He is also forced to surrender his key. Joey admits to the nurse that he forgot to take his medication. He yells at her as well as to Ms. Maxy when he returns to the classroom, and is immediately sent back to special education class. Harold, a special student, is having a party and Joey helps pass out hats and helps sing. When Harold is unable to blow out the candles, Joey helps him, believing he is doing something good by helping Harold get his wish. Instead of being happy, Mrs. Howard takes him to a corner, and gives him a time out session, and forbids him from having a cupcake, due to sugar content. After school, Joey forgets he has given his key to Ms. Maxy, so has to wait for his mother on the porch. He pesters her when she arrives home to ask her a question, but she first makes a drink. When allowed, Joey asks if he ate paint chips as a child, fell on his head, or if she drank a lot during her pregnancy with him. His mother pauses, and admits she drank as much as she normally does. The question upsets her however, and she begins asking Joey why he asks, knowing that the question "Why?" causes his brain to explode with activity. He explains that a new boy in special ed is disabled because his mother drank when she was pregnant. His mother demands that he stop trying to blame her for his problems but Joey notices there are tear drops on the newspaper she holds in her lap. She begins to ask "Why me?" as Joey pictures himself disabled, sitting blankly in the special education room. Joey laments that there are some days he is normal, and wishes all days could be that way. His words run together as he talks about his normal day and the activity running through his brain feverishly at all times. He wants only to be thought of as good, to be "normal," and liked.

In "Who," however, Joey shows again he is not normal. The children take a field trip to a nearby Amish farm, where Joey is immediately in trouble for playing with the rocking chairs while waiting in line to see the inside of the Amish farm. When he finally is allowed in, he sees women quilting and hooking, but is overpowered by a delicious smell. He discovers the smell is the baking of molasses pie. He lines up to taste the delicious pie but is told by Mrs. Maxy that the sugar is not good for him. He is given an apple slice with cinnamon. Rushed and hurt, he accepts the apple. The children are taken to a pumpkin patch but again, Joey is told he is not allowed to carve a pumpkin, since the knife is too dangerous. Joey, again hurt, lashes out by throwing the tool into the pumpkin patch. Told to go to the bus, Joey instead detours when she smells the delicious pie. Hurt, scared, and angry, Joey eats an entire pie. When the sugar hits Joey's system, he is a live wire, unable to control his energy. He runs through a corn field, cutting himself, and into a barn. Climbing into the rafters, Joey encounters an owl. The "who-ing" of the owl acts on Joey like the question "why," and he finds himself suddenly silent and thoughtful. When Ms. Maxy and others come to his rescue, Joey





jumps into a pile of hay and sprains his ankle. Mrs. Maxy, worried, checks him for broken bones while lamenting that what Joey plans to happen and what does happen are often two different things.

## Make a Wish and Who Analysis

The difference in Joey when he is medicated and when he is not medicated shows clearly the need for some form of continuous medication. Joey is well behaved when medicated, but when he is not, he yells at people, acts out, and cannot seem to help his behavior. However, the immediate use of the special education class in "Make a Wish" shows that the teachers are beginning to use the special ed as a barrier between themselves and Joey. Rather than giving him several warnings, as before, the teachers begin to send Joey to Mrs. Howard even for small infractions. This emphasizes one problem of special education for hyperactive students. In special education, Joey's "help" with Harold's candle again shows Joey is a nice person, whose thoughts are good and well intended. However, as the students, parents, and teacher gasp in shock at the perceived taking away of Harold's right to blow out his own candle, it is again apparent that what Joey intends is rarely the result.

Joey's questioning of his mother in this chapter reveal much about Joey's own thoughts about his mother's drinking and his mother's own guilt. Joey asks his question about her drinking during pregnancy seriously, but knows he has pushed his mother too far when she begins to cry. His thought that she might be crying because she drinks too much shows Joey's own thoughts that his mother may be an alcoholic. Further, his thought that she may be crying because of her sad life with him shows again his belief that his mother is unhappy with him, and with their life together. Joey's mother, on the other hand, shows her own guilt in this chapter. Her pause when asked the question, and her tears, suggest she is aware that she drank too much during pregnancy. Her resulting anger affirms this. In addition, Joey's description of his calm days, given with such detail and such longing, show he wants nothing more than to be normal. On the other hand, his frenzied, jumbled, run on description of his hyper nature shows that during those times, Joey really is at the mercy of his behavior.

In "Who," readers see another down side of Joey's diagnosis. Mrs. Maxy is only trying to help Joey in this chapter. She knows sugar is bad for him, and worries about his actions with the carving tool, since he has, in the past, shown dangerous behaviors on account of his lack of planning and thought. She believes she is doing what is best for Joey. However, Joey has his heart set on the pie, and being told he cannot have any hurts his feelings badly. For the second time, he is being told that he cannot have something, because there is sugar in it. When he is soon told that he cannot participate in something else, as well, he is rightfully angry and hurt. He feels that he is being left out and treated badly. For someone with Joey's past, such feelings of loneliness are likely to trigger anger and despair. Joey's anger only leads to further behavior problems, and eventually to a twisted ankle. Again, Joey does not intend to eat a pie, nor to cause any problem at all, but in his distracted, angry, and lonely state, his thoughts only exist in the here and now. He does not live beyond his current actions and as a result, he hurts

himself again. It is only when the owl asks Joey a question that his thoughts slow, showing another side to attention disorders. Joey has times when his brain switches off, generally due to a question. During those times, the mind stops, and his energy is drained as the brain focuses on the question. Knowing he has been warned several times, this incident foreshadows further problems with Joey.



# Gifted and Talented and Suspended

## Gifted and Talented and Suspended Summary

Joey has a substitute teacher in "Gifted and Talented," and he sneaks out with the gifted children to see a presentation in the auditorium. He sits behind the stage and listens as Mrs. Cole, a gifted teacher, talks about special people doing special things for others. Joey knows he is not part of the talented and gifted class, but also feels Cole is talking to him directly, in that he is special. He feels he can help make the world a better place. After the presentation, Joey goes to the nurse for her to wrap his ankle, and tells her about what he has heard, knowing she will not get him into trouble. He explains that he wants to do one really good thing each day, as Mrs. Cole suggested. When Mrs. Maxy returns, Joey admits to her that he sneaked out to see the presentation but explains that he feels he has improved from his behavior the day before, because he now seeks to better the world. He plans to make bumper stickers that say "Hate is Not a Family Value." He allows her to begin working on the bumper stickers and Joey stays on task for several minutes. Mrs. Maxy compliments his work, and he is happy. When he realizes he must hurry to finish, he takes Mrs. Maxy's sharp scissors. On his way to the back of the room, he trips over his slippers just as other children are entering the room, and accidentally cuts off the end of Maria's nose. Blood flows freely, and Joey panics. He tries to press it back into place, and tries to grab the scissors again to cut off his own nose in sympathy, while screaming he is sorry. Maria is rushed by ambulance to the hospital and Joey is removed from the classroom, crying.

Joey's mother and the principal speak in "Suspended" following the accident. Mrs. Jarzab explains that everyone understands Joey does not mean harm, but reminds that he does hurt himself and others. Ms. Pigza tries to defend Joey, but to no avail. Mrs. Jarzab explains that Ms. Pigza was warned that if Joey continued to have accidents that caused harm to others, he would be transferred. Joey is alarmed but is told to remain quiet. He is startled when his mother pinches him lightly, since he realizes he has been not listening for several minutes and has no idea what they are discussing. Asked to tell his side of the story, he explains, but Mrs. Jarzab reminds them Joey is, by law, required to be suspended for six weeks. During that time, he is to attend school at the special education center downtown for intensive counseling and therapy. All the way to the car, Joey looks for Maria's nose, thinking that if she lost it and he can find it, he will be in less trouble. Finding a Band-Aid that looks like the nose, Joey picks it up only to have it slapped from his hand by his mother. He realizes she is angry, but when the two stop to eat after ordering fast food, Ms. Pigza reminds him that he is not stupid or messed up. Joey's comment that everyone else thinks he is brain-damaged causes his mother to cry. She notes that she was messed up when she left Joey behind, but she pulled herself together for him and came back. She asks him to do the same. Joey begins to cry and his mother comforts him.



## Gifted and Talented and Suspended Analysis

Joey's actions in "Gifted and Talented" show the reader two major things. First, Joey shows that he is not a bad child. His goal, after being inspired by Mrs. Cole, is to help better the world. He knows he is special and he believes that being special means he needs to try and do something good for the world. Again, Joey's actions are based on a willingness and desire to help. Mrs. Maxy's comments ring in his head, and make him feel good about himself, which as previous chapters have shown, is something Joey naturally has a problem with. He desires nothing but to be praised and happy. On the other hand, readers see that what Joey intends to do and what occurs are never the same thing. Joey's accidental dismemberment of Maria is only likely to cause him great trouble and foreshadows his suspension in the next chapter. His reaction is extreme because Joey knows he has caused a dire situation and he is sorry for the accident. His tears at the end of the novel show he knows the severity of the situation. Mrs. Maxy's reactions to Joey are also symbolic. When she shudders, Joey also becomes aware that she knows that there is more to Joey's problems than only his medication.

"Suspend" is the natural progression of the storyline in light of the accident in the previous chapter. The principal, like Mrs. Maxy, knows that medication is only part of Joey's problems. Ms. Pigza's initial defense of Joey is normal for a parent, but even she seems to know Joey is in serious trouble and requires help. Her reactions to Joey's daze and his behaviors is almost one of resignation. She cries throughout the meeting because she knows Joey has consistently behaved in a way that must be corrected but she has no idea of how to help him. Joey's suspension is not a surprise but his mandatory attendance at a special education school is news to him and he expresses fear. Joey's search for the missing nose again shows his agony in his fear and shame, and shows him to be a caring individual.

The scene between mother and son talking in the car under a tree is a poignant moment in the story. Ms. Pigza again shows herself to be a tad selfish, in that she asks Joey to pull himself together as she did when she came back into his life. While it is true that Fran improved her life in order to return to her son, she claims that Joey owes it to her to do the same. Such a comment from Fran shows she sometimes chooses comments that would better be avoided. However, her support of Joey when he is clearly sad and hurt that he believes himself to be messed up shows she does love him very much. Joey, during this scene, is also shown to be a scared, confused, and hurt little boy. He is frightened of going to a new school, and even more frightened of failing his mother. He cries and his mother's comfort soothes him, again showing Joey loves his mother deeply, regardless of her actions in his previous life.



# Bad Seed and The Crossing

## Bad Seed and The Crossing Summary

In "Bad Seed," Joey decides to go to Maria's home to apologize. When he arrives however, he is greeted by her very angry father. He accuses Joey of being "messed up," nearly attacks him, and threatens to hurt Joey and his mother if Joey comes near Maria again. When Joey tries to say that his mother had no part in the accident, Maria's father angrily notes that she "had everything to do with it." Joey angrily defends his mother, noting that he himself is the problem and proudly walks away. Back home, he tries to find his medication so he can take it all and be normal, but his mother has taken them to work with her. When she returns from work, the two take a walk. She informs Joey she will be unable to see him off on the bus to his new school because she has to work. Joey is heartbroken and scared, but cheers up when she informs him she has two presents for him. The first, she says, is advice, and she tells him always to think of a good thing when he thinks of a bad thing. The second, she explains as they walk into a bookstore, is a book about dogs, because if he does well in special ed, he will be allowed to get one. Joey is beaming inside.

The following morning, in "The Crossing," Joey's special education bus arrives and the driver asks if he is the foster child. Joey is confused and becomes immediately agitated and hyper. He fears that they will take his mother away. He does get on the bus, however, where he meets Charlie, a boy whose hands grow from his shoulders due to a lack of arms. Charlie asks him to sit next to him and shakes his hand with his tiny fingers. Another boy sits behind the two in a cushioned helmet, slamming his head into the seat. Two other girls, May and June, also ride the bus, as they are being helped through special education to read forwards, as they have only learned how to things backwards. When the bus stops for railroad tracks, Joey nearly runs but remembers his mothers request for him to try and remains seated, although he is more agitated than ever. The students arrive and Joey is met by Ed Vanness, or Special Ed, Joey's caseworker. Ed tries to explain that Joey is not being punished but that the school is designed to help him. He also notes that Joey needs to learn to make better decisions in order to be better behaved. Joey, frightened, asks to see his mother, but is promised only a phone call. Ed walks Joey through the school, explaining things while Joey looks at the other children, frightened. Back in Ed's office, Joey asks to use the restroom, because he needs a break. He realizes that he is more frightened of his illness than of special education and he leaves the bathroom, telling Ed that his grandmother was convinced that he could not be better. Ed promises Joey they will help him get proper medication, feel better about himself, and to make better decisions. When Joey is finally allowed to call his mother, he does but she is busy. When he hangs up and redials several times, Ed notes these types of obsessive behaviors are choices and that, aside from Joey's medication, his way of making decisions must change in order for him to get better. When Joey asks for his mom, Ed notes that she is part of the problem.



## Bad Seed and The Crossing Analysis

The mother of Maria in "Bad Seed" shows a side of adults that is frightening but very accurate. Joey, meaning to apologize to Maria, has the courage to go to her home. However, her father, angry that his daughter has been hurt, says horrible things to Joey and advances on him. He even threatens Joey's family. Such actions are clearly wrong but represent how some adults feel about special education students within a "normal" classroom setting. Maria's father knows nothing of Joey and yet he feels he has the right to verbally threaten and abuse him because of his accidental harming of his daughter. Joey rightfully and pridefully walks away, but is clearly upset and shaken. Maria's father shows he blames Joey's mother for Joey's problems, at least in part, and this foreshadows Joey's realization in later chapters that his mother really is part of the problem. This chapter also shows Joey's mother attempting to help Joey think better about himself. Her advice to him helps him to stop thinking of bad thoughts, and begin thinking more positively. Finally, the promise of a dog for Joey brightens his outlook and gives him hope.

"The Crossing" symbolizes Joey's venture into the a new life through special education. Joey's irrational fear throughout the chapter about being mistaken for a foster child shows again his fear that his mother will again leave him, or be taken from him. Joey's mother has come to symbolize for Joey his only hope and the only person in his life who supports and loves him. The idea of losing her consistently causes him distress and fear. In addition, Joey's observations of the children around him on the bus show his own identification with the special education students and his fear that such an identification means he truly is "messed up." When he is nearly beside himself with anxiety however, it is again thoughts of his mother which keep him calm, showing her again to be a powerful force in his life.

This chapter also introduces Mr. Ed Vanness, Joey's caseworker. Ed's relationship with his students is great, in that he knows them by name, compliments them, and encourages them. Joey is at ease with Ed, and finds himself less afraid than anxious to become better. When Joey reveals his grandmother's words about his health, Ed's comments indicate that he realizes grandma's words hurt Joey and caused part of his issue. Ed's reassurances, therefore, are his way of helping to show Joey that he is cared for and that there are people who are trying to help him. When Joey shows signs of relying on his mother for comfort and security, Ed takes the opportunity to explain that Joey's mother is part of his problems. Knowing that Joey sees Fran as his entire support system, this concept foreshadows the confrontation between Joey and his mother in the following chapter.





# Shifting Gears and Pittsburgh

## Shifting Gears and Pittsburgh Summary

Joey confronts his mother in "Shifting Gears" about a number of topics that he and Ed talked about throughout the day. Joey explains that Ed believes Fran is part of the problem and that Joey tried to defend her. Ms. Pigza pours herself a drink and Joey informs her that he was afraid all day that she had been taken or had run away. When he told Ed, Joey explains, Ed noted that her abandonment of Joey was part of his problems with his behaviors and that his grandmother's abuse was even more of the problem. Ms. Pigza begins to show anger as she becomes defensive. Joey also confronts her about her drinking, asking if he is allowed to have two pills if she has two drinks. Ms. Pigza calms down and admits that she thought all day about Joey and became embarrassed at what he might say. She realizes she came back for him but that doing so was not enough to erase his problems. Joey further explains that the nutritionist stated he was not eating right and that he should be forced to eat vegetables. When Joey tells her he also talked about her drinking, Fran again becomes defensive. The two argue, but eventually come to terms and order pizza for one last "bad" meal. The following morning, Mrs. Maxy arrives at the house to give Joey his homework and the two talk. Joey is happy to see her and she seems genuinely pleased to know he is doing well. Joey finds out Maria's father has put her into Catholic school, believing public is too violent. Joey repeatedly says he is sorry and Mrs. Maxy reminds him that moving forward and shifting gears is necessary to keep living. They hug and Joey leaves for school. At school, Joey finds it hard to concentrate as he is worried about his doctor appointment late in the day. When it finally comes, Ed first speaks to Joey, reminding him that his medication is part of the problem, but his behaviors are another issue. Ed tests Joey's behavior by leaving him in the room alone with a container of Band-Aids, which Joey promptly sticks all over his body. When the doctor, Dr. Preston, comes in and is told Ms. Pigza cannot join them, he is clearly displeased. Joey is told he is being sent to Pittsburgh for a brain scan to make sure his brain is not damaged. When the doctor sees all the Band-Aids, he assumes Joey is being abused, so Ed forces Joey to admit to his behavior. The doctor reassures Joey and leaves but Joey finds himself worrying about the upcoming tests, and whether his brain is healthy.

The following day, Fran and Joey rise early and get onto the bus for Pittsburgh. Joey asks if they might see his father in town, but Ms. Pigza reminds Joey that his father would not know him if he saw him, which hurts Joey's feelings. On the bus, the two look at a dog book together. Joey relates to his mother that he used to sit in the window and wait for her to come back, after she abandoned him. Joey admits his grandmother would force him to stay in a chair by the window and he would think every woman who came to the house might be his mother. Fran stops Joey because it hurts her to hear, but he realizes that such stories are part of his problem and that talking about such hurts is a way to make them smaller. In his head, Joey tells Ed that his grandmother used to treat him like a dog and make him do tricks. If he did not do them, she would hit him with the fly swatter. Grandma would also pretend Joey's mother called, saying she





was coming home. She would dress him nicely and he would sit by the window, but Grandma would claim that his mother walked by and kept going, because she saw he was a bad boy. Joey would become upset and pull his hair out, which would prompt his grandmother to claim his mother had called, and said she would not return to a boy who pulled his hair out. In the end, Joey would feel miserable and cry for hours, knowing he had driven his mother away and hating himself. Joey tells his mother he wants a dog, because the dog will wait for him to come home and he will come home unlike his mother. Joey admits to himself that he is angry with his mother as Ed said he might be. The two continue talking and Fran tries to stop Joey from disbelieving in a cure for his problems. Joey is taken to the bathroom when he becomes loud and hyper, and as his mother apologizes to the other bus passengers, Joey realizes she is always sorry. Ms. Pigza gives Joey a pill and tells him she wanted to come back to him, but was drinking too much. She had to straighten herself out first. She claims she did not know what Grandma was doing to him. They soon arrive in Pittsburgh.

## Shifting Gears and Pittsburgh Analysis

Joey's confrontation of his mother in "Shifting Gears" shows his growing anger at her and his growing understanding that his problems are not merely due to a lack of medication. Joey now knows his mother's abandonment of him, his father's abandonment, his grandmother's abuse, and his mother's lack of parenting skills have all contributed to his illness and to his inability to make decisions. His sarcastic questions about her drinking also show he realizes she has a drinking problem. Conversely, Fran's defensiveness and her flashing anger at Joey show she too knows these things and feels guilty for them. She finally admits these problems when she states that providing a roof is not enough. Mrs. Maxy's visit shows her to be a caring woman who is interested in seeing Joey succeed. In addition, her revelation that Maria has been sent to Catholic school shows again the reactions of some parents to accidental incidents in school. Both Mrs. Maxy and Joey realize such accidents can happen anywhere, but Maria's family blames the school system for the incident. Joey's behavior in this chapter in terms of the Band-Aids again shows his inability to make good decisions. Joey knows Ed expects him to use the Band-Aids, and instead of behaving well, Joey cannot seem to help himself. Dr. Preston's reaction to the news that Fran will not be there shows he expects more from Joey's parent. In truth, the fact that Joey's mother is absent shows again her distant parenting style. Joey's fear about his brain, and the tests, shows he knows that if his brain is uninjured, he can get well, but if it is injured, he cannot recover.

The trip to Pittsburgh reveals even more about Joey's past and about why he is as he is. Joey's mother cannot stand to hear of his abuse by his grandmother, but Joey is learning that he has to talk about these abuses in order to heal and overcome them. His talk to Ed in his head shows Ed is already becoming a part of Joey's support system. The horrible treatment of Joey at the hands of his grandmother, including the constant use of his mother's false return as a weapon, explains why Joey still fears abandonment. Further, the knowledge that Joey was treated as a dog and beaten, combined with the knowledge that he was made to hate himself for his behavior shows



why he is so hard on himself. His tearing out of his hair, his self-hatred, and his behavioral disorders all stem from these situations he endured as a child. His anger with his mother is clear and defined, and Joey allows it to flow, which can only help him heal. He still loves his mother, as is shown by his consistent ability to calm himself when with her, and she loves him. Joey knows that his mother is ashamed and in the bathroom, Ms. Pigza admits her own mistakes, thereby allowing herself to heal. This shows that the two are making the journey to heal together and foreshadows their continued development.



# Moon Man, The Patch, and Picture Me Here

## Moon Man, The Patch, and Picture Me Here Summary

When Ms. Pigza and Joey arrive at the hospital, Joey is taken away while Ms. Pigza is left with paperwork. Joey is confused, but follows directions well, hoping not to make any mistakes for the test. While left alone, Joey again finds Band-Aids, and places them all over his body. After the test, during which Joey is placed into a machine that scans his body, he and his mother go to the gift shop. Joey is afraid, and wants to buy something, but his mother has little money. Joey becomes agitated, and begins spinning the post card rack, making a mess. Fran and Joey fight and storm from the gift shop, after several blocks, Ms. Pigza suggests that they go sightseeing from the top of the PPG building. From the roof, Joey is able to use binoculars to see the city below, but instead, looks upward to see if he can find his dad on the moon. He expresses a desire to see his father and Ms. Pigza gently reminds him that his father is an alcoholic, and may cause Joey more grief than happiness. They leave Pittsburgh and Joey realizes his home is not one he will ever have with his father.

The following week, in "The Patch," Fran, the doctor, Ed, and Joey discuss his test results. The scan shows his brain is functioning normally. Joey is given a patch that will deliver consistent medication to avoid the highs and lows his current medication causes. The doctor reminds them that Joey will still have to work on his behavioral problems, and Fran will have to work on the family conditions of the household. Ms. Pigza is overwhelmed as the doctor and Ed remind her they are there to help, and that if she needs anything she only has to ask. She explains to Joey that she likes people who like him. Almost immediately, Joey feels like a new person, and is reminded that Ed has taught him about having a positive attitude, and how that can help him. Joey and Ms. Pigza travel to a pet store, but they do not have Chihuahuas. One day, Joey sees a Chihuahua mix in the paper, and his mother purchases the dog, which Joey names Pablo. Joey believes the dog was meant for him, in that he is hyper, much like Joey used to be.

In the final chapter, "Picture Me Here," Joey admits that he feels better from the first day of his new medication. His thoughts become less scrambled and he is able to focus. He is soon able to return to school but Joey recognizes that he can never go without medication, and that he will always be wired differently. Charlie too is leaving the school and has the strength for a false arm. Joey returns to school and asks to say the pledge of allegiance. He speaks with Nurse Holyfield, who shows pride in how well he is doing. Although Joey says the pledge, he does add his own ending, which gets him in a small amount of trouble. He reports to Mrs. Howard in the special education room. Joey is welcomed back and is told by Harold's mother that Joey gives her hope. If he can improve, she notes, maybe Harold can too. Joey is overwhelmed at the idea that he can



give someone hope. S he tells him that he is naturally good and Joey, touched, tears up. Quietly, he goes to the Big Quiet Chair, chooses a book, and sits down to read.

## **Moon Man, The Patch, and Picture Me Here Analysis**

Joey's test in "Moon Man" is a minor portion of the chapter. Joey's increasing anger at his mother is much more apparent in this chapter, and symbolizes Joey's attempts to come to terms with his feelings. It is clear Joey harbors anger, and in this chapter, readers see that some of this anger is focused on a desire to see his father. He and Ms. Pigza argue over his father, but Joey comes to realize that his desire to see his father does not mean his father desires to see him. By the end of the chapter, Joey realizes that no matter what he wishes, his father is not, and likely will not, be a part of his family. Fran too shows growth as she informs Joey that, in order for her to agree to allow Joey to meet his father, she would first have to make sure that he would not cause Joey pain. Ms. Pigza knows Joey has gone through enough in his life, and that his experiences have caused him many problems. In this, she is trying to be a better parent, and make decisions that are good for him, regardless of his opinions.

In "The Patch," it is revealed that Joey's brain is fine and that with proper medication, therapy, and work, Joey can succeed. Ms. Pigza's show of emotion as the doctor and Ed show her understanding again shows her own emotional turmoil, and her need for a support system, as well. Joey's nearly immediate improvement is in part due to his medication, but in part due to a change in his atmosphere and in his attitude. Joey knows he can get better, as does his mother, and both are beginning to come to terms with their past mistakes. Both are beginning to embrace the future, and in doing so, they are helping to heal themselves. With the purchase of a dog, Joey's happiness is complete. The dog represents Joey's own care for something much like him, and as Ed said earlier, the ability to care for the dog shows Joey is really on his way to recovery.

"Picture Me Here" shows the final stage of Joey's recovery, and with Charlie's recovery, shows the benefits of special education. Allowed to return back to school, Joey is proud to be a better student. His decision to speak out following his pledge of allegiance shows Joey still has a spark within him, but that spark is no longer dangerous. Howard's mother's comments are a reminder to Joey that he has always been a good child, but that now he is able to show others he is good. He now brings hope to others and can be a role model for other people. The closing scene, with Joey climbing into the Big Quiet Chair to quietly read a book, brings Joey's story full circle to his beginning, showing he truly is on the road to recovery.



# Characters

## Joey Pigza

Joey Pigza is a young man with a hyperactivity disorder. Joey knows he is a good person, but cannot seem to help himself from getting into trouble. Joey's father and mother abandon him early in life, and he is forced to live with an abusive grandmother who gives him little support. Years later, his mother returns, only to throw his life into confusion and disorder. Joey has had many problems in school, and as a result has been placed on medication for his disorder. However, the medication seems to work sporadically and as a result, Joey often finds himself wired and bouncing off the walls. He is unable to control his behavior when he gets into this state, which causes him to do things that get him into trouble such as talking back, fidgeting to the point of harming himself, and not paying attention, which results in harm to others. Joey knows that he misbehaves but believes he is unable to be cured. When Ed Vanness gives him hope however, Joey realizes that part of his issues are related to his past, and his current situation. He finds the strength to confront his mother, and realizes she too has issues of her own. Over time, Joey learns that through new medication and a support system, he is able to control himself and find peace and happiness.

## Ms. Fran Pigza

Ms. Pigza, Joey's mother, is a troubled woman with several issues. Having been abandoned by her husband, she chose to follow him, and leave her son with her abusive mother. After years of drunkenness, she returns to her son, only to find him a boy with severe hyper-attention disorders. She also learns her mother is abusive to Joey, both physically and mentally. Determined to make a better life, Ms. Pigza pays down rules for the household. When Grandma is unable to follow them, she abandons the two, leaving Ms. Pigza to deal with Joey on her own. Ms. Pigza has a drinking problem and often feels sorry for herself and her situation. She loves Joey, but also blames him for some of her issues, refusing to take the blame herself. It is only when Joey begins to question her about her drinking that Mr. Pigza begins to accept fault for her part in Joey's problems. While Joey challenges her, it is clear she loves him and cares deeply for him. She does what she feels is best for him and although her decisions are not always the best, they are usually made with the best intentions. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Ms. Pigza has also changed as a result of Joey's new found peace and that she too finally believes Joey's situation can improve.

## Grandma Pigza

Joey's grandmother is a major character in Joey's life for many years and as such, a major part of his long-standing issues. Joey's grandmother is a woman with similar attention and hyperactivity issues to Joey. However, hers have a tendency to surface



through her mouth, in the form of verbal abuse. Left with Joey after his mother abandoned him, she is consistently berating Joey as a boy and showing little support or sympathy for his problems. At times, she is caring and funny, but even Joey notes that she is cruel. She holds him up by the ears until he begs to be set free. She repeatedly uses his mother's absence to torture him, mentally. She blames Joey for her own problems and often for his condition. Finally, in a fit of rage, she tries to close him in the refrigerator. Joey, knowing the dangers, refuses and Grandma leaves, permanently. It is clear from Joey's countless stories to his mother about his grandmother's abuse that she is partially responsible for his actions and for his bleak outlook on life. While she does provide a house for him, she does not provide the support and love Joey needs.

## **Ed Vanness / Special Ed**

Mr. Ed Vanness, known to the the children as "Special Ed," is a caseworker assigned to Joey's particular case. It is clear from the beginning that Ed believes all people can improve and that no one is a lost cause. He is firm with Joey by being specific in his directions, and in explaining his goals for Joey. He believes strongly that Joey is not only a product of his illness but also of his past and his present. Rather than simply treating the illness with drugs, Ed understands that Joey needs to modify his behaviors and that his mother needs to modify her own as well. Ed helps Ms. Pigza to see that she too is part of the problem and that her actions can be part of a lasting solution for Joey. Ed helps Joey to achieve his goals, not just through medication, but through hope and outlook, as well.

## **Mrs. Maxy**

Mrs. Maxy is Joey's school teacher. Mrs. Maxy likes Joey and believes he is a good child. However, Mrs. Maxy also somewhat blames Joey for his problems, noting that it is his decisions that cause him to make mistakes. She realizes Joey needs medication for his disorder but also recognizes that Joey's behavioral problems stem from more than simply his inadequate medications. Mrs. Maxy initiates having Joey attend special education classes and is also the teacher who brings Joey his makeup work from school. Mrs. Maxy tries to control joey, but at times when she fails, her anger seems directed at Joey himself. While she is certainly one of Joey's supporters, her methods and beliefs can sometimes seem counter to this. In the end, however, Mrs. Maxy is a large part of Joey's support system, and a supporter of his behavioral modification.

## **Carter Pigza**

Carter Pigz is the father of Joey. Carter abandoned Joey and his family when Joey was only in kindergarten. He presumably went to live in Pittsburgh, where Joey's mother also went following her own abandonment of Joey. Based on information from others, Joey learns that his father also had an attention deficit problem as well as a fairly severe



drinking problem. Joey wishes to meet his father, but his mother knows Carter would likely simply cause Joey pain.

## **Nurse Holyfield**

Nurse Holyfield is one of the few persons in Joey's life who truly believes in him. Nurse Holyfield does not think Joey is a bad person, like some of his teachers and fellow students. Instead, she believes that he is being improperly medicated. Holyfield helps Joey whenever possible, and reminds him on several occasions that he is a good person. She is always happy to see him and provides another layer to his support system in his school.

## **Charlie**

Charlie is a friend Joey meets on the Special Education bus the first day of his new school. Charlie is disabled, in that his arms have no elbows and little length, so his hands are mere stumps at his shoulders. Charlie befriends Joey when he is frightening, and over time, he too improves. He gains strength in his hands and eventually learns to use a prosthesis. Charlie understands the frustration Joey feels as a challenged person and thus provides Joey with a needed support system.

## **Mrs. Howard**

Mrs. Howard is the Special Education teacher in Joey's school. Mrs. Howard attempts to help Joey by helping him to focus, and by limiting his intake of sugar. She even goes so far as to remove his shoes when he finds banging on chair legs with his sneakers more entertaining than schoolwork. However, Mrs. Howard's skills are not enough to fully help Joey, and he is instead sent to a special school. She is, however, one of the few individuals in Joey's life who is supportive and who believes he can overcome his illness.

## **Maria Dombrowski**

Maria Dombrowski is a student at the same school which Joey attends. Maria is the class president and often has to be the one to write Joey's name in her book of those who need disciplinary action. One day, she accidentally walks in front of Joey when he is running with scissors and he cuts off the tip of her nose. Her parents remove her from school and send her to Catholic school.





## Objects/Places

### Tasmanian Devil

The Tasmanian Devil is a hyper and destructive cartoon to whom Joey often compares himself

### Big Quiet Chair

The Big Quiet Chair is a chair in the special education classroom that the children use to read quietly.

### Transdermal Patch

A Transdermal Patch is used to constantly deliver medication into the body.

### Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh is the city where both Joey's father and grandmother go to live, after abandoning him.

### Amish

The Amish are a group of individuals who live and work according to strict religious principles.

### Special Education

Special Education is a form of education tailored to fit the needs of students who are unable to learn in a standard classroom environment. This includes students with mental or physical disabilities.

### Brain SPECT Test

The SPECT is the test done on Joey to determine if his brain is injured.

### Amaretto Sour

An Amaretto Sour is the type of drink Joey's mother prefers as her own form of medication to help her deal with Joey and his problems.



## **Chihuahua**

The Chihuahua is the type of dog that Joey would like to have.

## **Thrifty Nickel**

The Thrifty Nickel is the newspaper in which Joey finds his dog.



# Themes

## Attention Deficit Disorder

One of the primary themes throughout the novel is the disease of hyperactive disorder and its effect on the lives of children with the illness and those around them. Joey Pigza is essentially a good child with a good heart. Having been abused and abandoned as a child, he is still bright and loving. However, it is clear from the beginning that Joey has a hard time concentrating and that he is extremely hyper. Joey often is unable to sit still, speaks when he should not, and acts out in ways he almost cannot help. He swallows his house key, secretly eats a pie, twists his ankle, and eventually harms another student as a result of his hyper nature. Joey wants to behave well but his medication simply does not control his actions. In addition, after a lifetime of abuse and inadequate support, Joey is unable to make good decisions that help him avoid trouble. It is clear his disease affects almost everything in Joey's life. His relationship with his mother is strained, partly due to his illness. His mother has her own drinking problems, and the added stress of a child like Joey often leads her to be more upset. Joey's teachers become exasperated and tend to pass him just so they no longer have to work with him. Local children dislike him because he is disruptive. He has few friends. Joey's life is essentially ruled by his illness until caring counselors and teachers help him to find the right medication and learn behaviors that can help him to avoid problem situations.

## How Abuse Affects Behavior

The topic of abuse and how abuse affects behavior is another primary topic in the novel. Joey has been raised primarily by his grandmother. She is an older woman who was left with a young child when her daughter ran off with her husband and left the young child behind. She too has attention disorders and this often causes her to speak out in anger, without seeming to care for the feelings of others. This verbal abuse causes Joey to think little of himself, and causes him to believe there is no cure for him, and that he will always be "wired wrong." These negative emotions cause more problems for Joey, where instead of learning to cope with his disease, he often uses it for a crutch for his bad behavior. Additionally, Joey's mother abandoned him as well, which caused lasting feelings of hurt and rejection. This is clear when Joey fears his mother has run away again as a bus driver mistakes him for a foster child. His fear is also shown when Joey speaks with his mother about his anger at her departure and his consistent fear that he will be left alone. His, in turn, again causes Joey to act out against his mother at times. Over the course of the novel, Joey learns to overcome some of these problems as he learns that his mother does love him and that he can improve with medication and with behavioral modification.



## Benefits of Special Education

The benefits of special education are another topic touched on in the novel. Joey is sent originally to special education because of his difficulties in concentrating in his regular classroom. His new teacher, Mrs. Howard, clearly wants to help Joey and the other students. There are many in his new classroom with physical and mental disabilities, and Mrs. Howard has ways to deal with all of them. When Joey shows signs of restlessness, she simply gives him ways to be restless without being disruptive. When he harms another student as a result of his restlessness, however, it is clear Mrs. Howard's methods are not enough. When Joey is sent to a special education school elsewhere, he is confronted with students with more severe handicaps. He meets Charlie who was born without arms, so his hands come directly from his shoulders. He meets May and June, who have learned to communicate only backwards. He meets other who are in wheelchairs, mentally disabled, or injured. Mr. Ed Vanness informs Joey that some children will not return to school, but most will because the school helps them to learn how to function well in spite of their problems. By the end of the story, Joey is medicated properly and learns to make better choices, Charlie gains the strength for a prosthesis, and others improve as well, showing that special education is a valuable tool. Joey is able to return back to school, and although he will always have to take medication, he has learned, through his special education, that to be different is okay and that one can still be complete.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is the first-person perspective told through the eyes of Joey Pigza. This point of view is necessary to understand Joey's journey through ADHD and his struggle to regain his life. Without this first-person view of the world, the reader would be unable to really see Joey's state of being and understand why Joey has so many problems in life. This point of view is reliable because only Joey can explain how he feels in certain situations and how he sees things. Since the growth of Joey's character is the most important theme in the novel, this point of view is required. Otherwise, the growth and change in his character and behavior could not be as clearly explained or described. In addition, how Joey sees the support system around him plays a vital role in his recovery, and again, without a first person point of view, these characters would not be as well understood from Joey's perspective. The story is told in a mixture of dialogue and description. This method helps the reader to understand how Joey thinks and how those thoughts are then translated to action. Since this translation is a fundamental point of the novel, where Joey finds himself planning to do one thing and doing something else, such information is vital to the story and relies on a strong first-person perspective.

## Setting

The novel is set in the present day in Pennsylvania. Many of the incidents in the novel happen within Joey's school and in his modest home. Within the school, Joey spends much of his time in the classroom with his teacher, Mrs. Maxy. The class takes a field trip to an Amish farm in Lancaster County. At the farm, Joey eats a pie, has a sugar rush, and as a result is unable to control his behavior. He ends up spraining his ankle. Once back in school, he is taken to a special education room, where students with a variety of disabilities are given special attention. There is a Big Quiet Chair where students are expected to be able to sit and read, but Joey has difficulty staying still. After an incident in which Joey hurts another student, he is sent to a special education school in the city. The bus ride shows him that there are many students with severe disabilities. Once at the new school, Joey is taught different ways to deal with his behavioral issues. He is sent to Pittsburgh for a brain test, where he experiences the city for the first time and begins to wonder about his father. He returns home, and to his school system, where he is finally able to sit in the Big Quiet Chair.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple and informal. The sentences are consistent with the storyline and are written as though they arise from the mind of a child with ADHD. Many are run-on sentences and many are very animated, as thoughts of a younger child tend



to be. Although occasionally unfocused, this method of writing does help to show the disjointed thoughts that are a part of Joey's problems in the novel. The language of the novel also tends to show the emotion of Joey as he works through his behavioral issues. It is clear simply by the wording choices what type of day Joey is having and whether or not his medication is working. Also, the language shows the deep-seated feelings Joey harbors over his mother's abandonment and his grandmother's abuse of him during his early childhood. This too helps the reader to understand Joey's character. The dialog within the book shows his changing attitudes towards his mother and towards those around him as he searches for a reason for his illness. This effect is achieved because the reader is able to see Joey's progression throughout the novel. By the end of the novel, as Joey learns to think and behave differently, his thought patterns calm down and become more associated and more cohesive in nature.

## Structure

The novel is separated into chapters of unequal length. There are fifteen chapters in total and each chapter is named with both a number and a title that represents actions occurring within that chapter. The chapters are short and consist of both descriptions as well as dialogue. There are a total of 154 pages.

The plot of the novel is simple and is written for a younger audience. The novel revolves around the life of Joey Pigza, a young boy with an attention and hyperactivity disorder. He is a bright boy, but is plagued by his own inability to control his behaviors. Abused as a child, left by his father and mother, and often made fun of, Joey is often in trouble, and annoyed with himself for his behaviors. He is not a bad person, but is simply unable to help himself behave. He has been led to believe that he has no hope, and it is only when he gains a support system that he is able to see a positive future for himself. The pace of the novel is quick because it is a short novel. It is very easy to read with colorful characters and a plot centered around a delightful boy whom most readers can relate to.



## Quotes

"At school they say I'm wired bad, or wired mad, or wired sad, or wired glad, depending on my mood and what teacher has ended up with me. But there is no doubt about it, I'm wired" (Chapter 1, pg. 3.)

"'It's gonna be okay,' she whispered, as if loud talk would wake up the hurt" (Chapter 3, pg. 26.)

"It was different. They were tired from being so sad and now they were sad some more because I was screwed up too and they felt bad for me like they felt bad for their own kids because they figured I wasn't ever going to get better" (Chapter 4, pg. 39.0)

"She made me sit in the Big Quiet Chair and read a book that couldn't be read because when I looked at the letters they kept sliding off the page like drops of mercury when you smash open a thermometer, which is something I know about" (Chapter 5, page 47.)

"Its just that there is always a difference between what you think you are doing and what happens to you and everyone else" (Chapter 6, page 66.)

"Or they call me Retard. So really, messed up is nicer than Retard, or Brain Damaged, or Zippy the Pinhead" (Chapter 8, page 82.)

"When you were a baby I screwed up and left you behind but I loved you so much I pulled it together and came back to you. Now you have to pull it together for me" (Chapter 8, page 82.)

"It was as if my life was trapped between two words: run or stay" (Chapter 10, page 94.)

"'Why is it that one of us has to be right and one of us has to be wrong?,' she asked. 'Why does it always come down to that?'" (Chapter 11, page 107.)

"'After you were gone I started asking Grandma when you were coming back, and she said 'Any day now, I suspect.' And she set a chair in the front-room window, and every evening I would sit there with my toys and stuffed animals and books and I'd wait'" (Chapter 12, page 121.)

"No matter how smart the doctors are, or no matter what medication I take, I'll always somewhere inside myself be wired wrong and nothing can be done about it" (Chapter 15, page 148.)

"And it was amazing to me that she said what she did because I never thought someone would ever point to me and say I gave them hope that someday their kid would be like me" (Chapter 15, page 153.)





## Topics for Discussion

Joey's grandmother abused him in several ways throughout his childhood. How much of an effect did this abuse have on Joey? Do you believe some of his problems are related to this abuse? Why or why not? Do you think, had he not had these experiences, he would still have a problem with hyperactivity? Why?

Grandmother herself has a problem with hyperactivity disorder, as does Carter, his father. Grandma is abusive and cruel to people, while Carter is an alcoholic. Do you believe these character's problems might be related to their own hyperactivity disorder? Why or why not? Does knowing that they have this disorder help explain some of their behaviors? Does it excuse them? Why or why not?

Discuss the idea of medicating children like Joey. Do you believe medication can help ADHD children? Why or why not? Do you think the medication in today's society is prescribed accurately? Why or why not? Do you think Joey's situation occurs in the real world often? Why? What can be done to change this?

Choose a scene in the novel where Joey does something bad. Compare it to a time you yourself have done something considered bad by others. Why did Joey do what he did? Why did you? What are similarities between the two situation? What are the differences?

There are some individuals in the story who believe children like Joey should not be in classrooms with "normal" children, because of their dangerous behaviors. There are others who believe these children benefit from "regular" surrounding, in that they are able to better learn how to behave. Which do you agree with? Why? What are some of the reasons you believe these types of children should either be excluded from regular classrooms, or included?

Special Ed tells Joey that his home life is part of his problem. His mother is angry with Joey for telling Ed that she drinks, that his nutrition is not proper, and other things they do and do not do at home. Do you believe Ms. Pigza's drinking problem has an effect on how Joey views his own problems, and his medication? Why? Why do you think Joey compares his own medication to his mother's drinking? What does that say about how Joey views alcohol? Is that a problem? Why?

Joey's mother comments, "...I can't take a chance that he won't upset you more than love you" when Joey asks about meeting his father. What does she mean by this statement? What are her concerns? Are they justified? Why or why not? Do these risks outweigh the benefits of meeting hi, in your opinion? Why or why not?