

# **Looking for Alaska Study Guide**

**Looking for Alaska by John Green (author)**

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# Plot Summary

This novel for young people chronicles the eventful first year at private school for teenaged Miles Halter. As Miles makes new friends and discovers an interest in philosophy, he also discovers important answers to fundamental questions of human existence and equally fundamental truths about the natures of both loyalty and love.

The novel begins with a prologue-like description of a poorly attended going away party thrown for Miles by his well-meaning mother. After the sort-of party has ended, Miles explains to his parents why he wants to attend boarding school - not because he has so few friends, as his mother suggests, but because he wants to experience more of life.

After being dropped off at his new school by his parents, Miles meets his commanding roommate Chip and Chip's playful, attractive friend Alaska, both of whom introduce Miles to the ways of the school. That night, Miles is hazed by a group of wealthy kids whom Chip refers to as the Weekend Warriors, a hazing that goes beyond the usual ritual hazing of newcomers to such a degree that Chip believes something else is going on, and vows revenge.

As Miles starts classes, he discovers that he has an early favorite - World Religions, taught by the elderly and demanding Dr. Hyde. He also discovers that the rivalry between the Weekend Warriors and full-time boarders like Chip, Alaska and himself is quite intense, and has been going on for some time. Meanwhile, his friendship with Chip and his attraction to Alaska both intensify, and he makes new friends with Japanese student Takumi and Rumanian student Lara.

Chip and Alaska formulate a plan for taking revenge for the Weekend Warriors' attack on Miles and a subsequent attack on Alaska, calling on Miles, Takumi and Lara for help. The five friends soon enact their plan, hiding out in an old barn while they wait for the effects of their prank to dissipate. While there, they get drunk and, as part of a game to kill time, reveal important secrets about their lives. Also at this point, Miles and Lara get a little physical with each other and decide that they are boyfriend/girlfriend.

Following a visit to Chip's family at Thanksgiving and a visit home at Christmas, Miles comes to realize that his friendships at school are actually a kind of family. Meanwhile, he is becoming more and more attracted to Alaska, and increasingly intrigued by Hyde's lessons in World Religions class. One night, a drunken celebration in Alaska's dorm room ends with Miles and Alaska on the verge of making love when Alaska receives a telephone call that changes her mood completely and sends her rushing into the night, berating herself for always messing things up. The next morning Miles, Chip and all the other students at the school are told that Alaska died the night before in a traffic accident.

The grief stricken Miles and Chip both blame themselves for her death, and mount an investigation into what happened, searching out a police officer present at the scene of Alaska's accident, talking to her boyfriend, and wondering whether she committed



suicide. Their grief and anger spill out onto each other, but a series of intense confrontations don't damage their friendship, and they ultimately come together (with Takumi and Lara) to commemorate Alaska's life with a major prank. Dr. Hyde, meanwhile, sets a pair of exams in which he asks his students to consider Alaska's life and death in terms of the philosophies he discusses in class. As a result of his investigations and his work for Dr. Hyde, the intensely grieving Miles eventually comes to terms with Alaska's death, realizing that what made Alaska special was something more than the sum of her physical, emotional, and experiential parts.



# Before, Part 1, p. 4 - 21

## Before, Part 1, p. 4 - 21 Summary

This novel for young people chronicles the eventful first year at private school for teenaged Miles Halter. As Miles makes new friends and discovers an interest in philosophy, he also discovers important answers to fundamental questions of human existence and equally fundamental truths about the natures of both loyalty and love.

one hundred thirty six days before - In first person narration, Miles describes his mother's elaborate preparations for a going away party (see "Quotes," p. 3) which is ultimately attended by only two people (see "Quotes," p. 4). After the guests leave, Miles' parents ask him whether his lack of friends is the reason he wants to go to boarding school, the same school his father attended, and he says no, explaining that he wants to go because of the last words of a famous writer (see "Quotes," p. 5).

one hundred twenty eight days before - After his parents drop him off and after unsuccessful attempts to both enjoy his new found solitude (see "Quotes," p. 8) and escape from the oppressive heat, Miles meets his roommate Chip. Miles comments in narration on how physically different he and Chip are (Chip is short and muscular, Miles is tall and skinny) and on how commanding Chip is. After Chip essentially orders Miles to follow him in search of cigarettes, they visit the dorm room of the chatty, outspoken Alaska, a beautiful girl who, conversation reveals, came to Culver Creek in the same year as Chip. After getting cigarettes from her, and after introducing Miles as a guy who memorizes people's last words, Chip and Miles go out and sit by the lake, where Chip tells Miles to call him the Colonel, gives him a nickname of his own (Pudge, ironic because of Miles' skinniness), and warns him against several things - in particular, telling on fellow students who've broken the rules, and offending the strict teacher and dorm supervisor, Mr. Starnes (nicknamed "The Eagle"). After Chip goes in search of his girlfriend, Miles is visited by Alaska, who tells him about the last words of Simon Bolivar as quoted in a historical novel (*The General in his Labyrinth*) - "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?" Miles and Alaska discuss what Bolivar might have meant without coming to any kind of conclusion, their conversation turning to Alaska's description of some of the pranks she and Chip have pulled (see "Quotes," p. 20). Further conversation reveals that Miles doesn't have a girlfriend, and that Alaska wants to make him a deal - she'll find him a girlfriend, if he'll find her the meaning of Bolivar's quote.

## Before, Part 1, p. 4 - 21 Analysis

This opening section introduces most of the novel's central elements. In terms of character, there is protagonist Miles, at the beginning of his journey of transformation (from naïve geek longing for human companionship into wounded but wiser young man). Other important elements about Miles worth noting in this section include his interest in the last words of famous people, which is important for two reasons. It makes



for an important plot point on several occasions (such as Miles' conversation with Alaska at the end of this section), and also serves as a trigger for Miles' thematically relevant considerations about the nature of life and death (see "Themes"). The last words referred to in this chapter (see "Quotes," p. 5) are particularly important, in that they constitute an essential component of the search Miles begins when he arrives at the school and pursues through, among other things, his relationship with Alaska. Also in terms of character, this section introduces Miles' roommate and confidante Chip and love interest Alaska, both of whom are portrayed with vividly individualistic personalities and both of whom are, in varying ways, antagonists to Miles. Antagonists in this case are defined as characters who, by their actions and attitudes, trigger change in the protagonist, which is exactly what both Chip and Alaska do. Another antagonist is also introduced - Mr. Starnes, who is another sort of antagonist, the sort who triggers change by providing obstacles for the protagonist to overcome.

In terms of situation, much of the important information here comes from Chip, who explains the rules of the institution, primarily the powerful tradition of not ratting out, or telling on, fellow students. This aspect of the novel, an essential component of the narrative's thematic emphasis on loyalty, plays out on several levels throughout the narrative. One other thematic element introduced here includes the idea of the labyrinth (see "Objects/Places" and also "Topics for Discussion - In what ways have you had an experience ..."). It's important to note that most of the thematic and character elements introduced in this section foreshadow narrative developments throughout the novel. One other important piece of foreshadowing in this section is Alaska's reference to the pranks she and Chip have played, further pranks (eventually involving Miles and other students) playing defining roles at several later points in the narrative.



## Before, pt. 2, p. 21 - 38

### Before, pt. 2, p. 21 - 38 Summary

one hundred twenty seven days before - The next day, Miles is visited by The Eagle, who gives him his timetable. Afterwards, Chip takes Miles down to the cafeteria, where they meet Japanese student Takumi, who talks with Chip about how the girl who used to be Alaska's roommate (Marya) got expelled for breaking several of The Eagle's rules, including being with her boyfriend (Paul). They discuss their belief that the girl and her boyfriend were "ratted out" by someone (i.e. someone told Mr. Starnes about them and they were then expelled). They also refer to Chip's girlfriend, one of the so-called "Weekend Warriors" (see "Characters"). That night, Miles is woken up by three guys who take Miles down to the lake, wrap him in duct tape, and throw him in, leaving him to make his own way back to shore. Miles eventually does, and also gets himself out of the waterlogged tape, wrapping himself in a towel the guys left behind. He initially avoids going back to his room out of fear of being humiliated in front of Chip, going instead to Alaska's in the hope that she will perhaps explain what happened, but she mocks him and he goes back to his room. There, Chip is shocked to learn that Miles was bound up in tape - the ritual for freshmen is usually just being thrown in the lake. Miles considers telling The Eagle what happened, but Chip insists that such things are dealt with by the students in their own way, and promises revenge.

one hundred twenty-six days before - The next day, his first day of classes, Miles discovers a real interest in his World Religions class, taught by the elderly Dr. Hyde. Meanwhile, Chip asks Miles to point out which of the other students had been involved in the taping-and-tossing incident the night before. In World Religions, Miles points out a boy named Kevin and another boy, and later, he points out a third. Chip tells him they're all Weekend Warriors, and the third boy is a friend of his girlfriend, Sara. As Dr. Hyde begins his lecture, Miles realizes that he is essentially talking about "the nature of the labyrinth ... and the way out of it" (see "Quotes," p. 32). Later that afternoon, Miles is visited by Alaska, who apologizes for her behavior the night before but adds that he needs to be tough.

one hundred twenty-two days before - A fight between Chip and his girlfriend Sara leads to a conversation between Chip and Miles in which Chip reveals that Sara and the other Weekend Warriors believe that he was the one who "ratted out" Marya and Paul, but that he (Chip) thinks it was one of the Warriors. Refusing to say anymore, Chip goes back to studying.

### Before, pt. 2, p. 21 - 38 Analysis

Important elements introduced in this section include the presence, attitudes and actions of the Weekend Warriors (see "Characters"), their actions in this section clearly upping the ante/stakes in their apparently ongoing rivalry with the full time, generally



less wealthy boarders. The particular experience they put Miles through can be seen as literally foreshadowing ongoing conflict, throughout the narrative, between the two groups of students, and also as metaphorically foreshadowing his feeling bound and trapped by his loving grief after Alaska's death in the latter part of the book. Another important foreshadowing in this section includes the reference to Marya and Paul, the question of who ratted them out playing a defining role at several points in the action later in the narrative (the question of who told on them is also a fundamental component in the narrative's thematic consideration of the nature of loyalty).

Other important elements include the introduction of Dr. Hyde and his course in World Religions, both of which play important roles in the narrative's thematic consideration of the nature of both life and death (see "Themes"). Also in this section, there is a reiteration of the labyrinth motif, or repeated image, which recurs throughout the narrative and which can be seen as evoking the essential nature of Miles' inner journey of transformation as described in "Before, Part 1, Analysis." Again, see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways have you ..."

At this point, it's worth noting the chapter headings which are, in this analysis, reproduced as they appear in the book (i.e. with the words all in lower case) and which, by including simply the word "before" without defining the coming event (i.e. the event that THESE events are "before"), create a powerful sense of suspense, of counting down to some kind of important traumatic event. For further consideration of this aspect of the work see "Style - Structure."





## Before, Part 3, p. 38 - 55

### Before, Part 3, p. 38 - 55 Summary

one hundred ten days before - When Dr. Hyde kicks Miles out of World Religions for looking out the window at the woods rather than listening to the lecture, Alaska tries to defend him, and is also kicked out. When class ends, they are joined by Chip and Takumi, the four of them wandering through the woods to a place Takumi calls The Smoking Hole (see "Objects/Places"). There the four of them smoke cigarettes, complain about Hyde, and what happened to Marya and Paul. As Takumi playfully raps about their situation, Alaska comments that she finds Miles "adorable," and he reacts with embarrassment, later asking why she smokes her cigarettes so fast. She comments that everyone else smokes "to enjoy. I smoke to die."

one hundred nine days before - The next evening, Chip takes Miles to a game being played by what Chip describes as the school's truly awful basketball team where they are seated behind Kevin, who suggests that because of what he and his friends did to Miles ("Before, Part 1"), they are now even with Chip for ratting out Marya and Paul and there can be a truce between the two factions of students. Chip swears he wasn't the one who ratted, and then proposes a deal - if Miles doesn't know the last words of any president Kevin names, the truce is on. If he DOES know, no truce. Kevin names President Millard Fillmore, Miles recounts his last words, and Chip taunts Kevin, saying there is no truce. Later, during the game, Chip leads the rest of the school in heckling the opposing team and is eventually thrown out, confessing to Miles (who has left the auditorium with him) that he (Chip) is on a thirty-seven game streak of being thrown out. Miles comments admiringly in narration (see "Quotes," p. 49).

one hundred eight days before - The next day, Dr. Hyde has Miles stay after class, reveals that he knows Miles enjoys the class, and reminds him of the true essence of the Buddhist philosophy they've been discussing ... be fully present in the immediate moment (i.e. in class) and savor other moments (i.e. the woods) when actually IN them.

one hundred one weeks before - Two days before an impending math exam, Alaska takes Miles and a few other students (including druggie Hank and Rumanian Lara) for a tutorial session, eating french fries and smoking constantly. When Hank comments that marijuana is healthier than cigarettes, Alaska comments that she may die young, but she'll die smart.

one hundred days before - After successfully passing his math exam, Miles hangs out with Alaska, asking her how she got her name. After she explains (see "Quotes," p. 53), she adds that she's managed to get away from her home but not quite far enough. This leads Miles to feel an urge to kiss her, but she goes on to talk about how dreams of the future are a means of avoiding reality (see "Quotes," p. 54), a sentiment with which Miles agrees. He comments that sometimes he just doesn't "get" her, and she responds by saying he's not supposed to get her.



## Before, Part 3, p. 38 - 55 Analysis

Important elements in this section include the introduction of The Smoking Hole (see "Objects/Places"), the escalation of tensions in the battle between the Weekend Warriors and the other students (through Miles' memory of last words), and Miles' admiration of Chip. This, in turn, can be seen as a component of Miles' motivation to emulate Alaska and Chip by joining in their pranks - he wants to be as much of an independent free spirit as they are, another aspect of his search for the Great Perhaps - see "Before, Part 1". Other important elements include the introduction of Lara, who plays an important role in several upcoming events, and Alaska's references to death. These references foreshadow her eventual death at the end of "Before, Part 8" and both seem to indicate, at the least, that death is on her mind, if she is not in fact suicidal (see "Topics for Discussion - Do you think Alaska's death was deliberate or accidental...").

Also important is the conversation between Dr. Hyde and Miles about the Buddhist philosophy of being in the moment. This is an important lesson that Miles tries to apply throughout the narrative as part of his experience of The Great Perhaps, but fails to apply in the "After" section of the book (i.e. focusing more on what was, or what might have been, when Alaska was alive as opposed to the reality of what IS after her death.) Finally, there is the increasing romantic/sexual tension between Miles and Alaska which, in turn, leads to the deepening of Miles' feelings of love and their near-sexual encounter at the end of "Before, Part 8" which, in ITS turn, leads to many of the emotional confrontations / complications in the "After" section of the book.



## Before, Part 4, p. 55 - 66

### Before, Part 4, p. 55 - 66 Summary

ninety nine days before - The next day, after a long day of study Chip, Miles, Takumi and Alaska take a smoke break at The Smoke Hole. They are discovered by The Eagle, who calls them to "Jury" the next day. When Miles comments on how casually Alaska seems to be taking the situation, she comments that "sometimes you lose a battle. But mischief always wins the war."

ninety eight days before - The Jury, Miles explains in narration, is made up of twelve members of the student body who pass judgment on their fellow students for non-expellable offenses like smoking. Miles and Alaska arrive first at the sentencing, and are soon followed by Takumi and Chip, who tell Miles and Alaska to stay quiet. In the jury room The Eagle explains that he only saw Alaska actually smoking. Takumi says he and Miles were just keeping them company, which isn't true. As The Jury deliberates, Miles asks what's going on, but Takumi tells him to keep quiet. The Jury's verdict is that Alaska and Chip, both of whom also have previous records at the school, are to do dishwashing service and are "one problem away from a phone call home." Takumi and Miles are to receive no punishment, but the incident will be kept on file.

eighty nine days before - Shortly after the trial and still ignoring the school's ban on smoking, Alaska tells Miles that she's found him a girlfriend - Lara, who was with the group on the tutoring session ("Before, Part 3"). Alaska also says that on the upcoming Friday Miles and Lara will join in on a triple date, to which Chip and Sara are also invited, along with Alaska, her boyfriend Jake, and Takumi.

eighty seven days before - The triple date turns out to be another basketball game. As the game progresses, Chip continues his routine of harassing the opposition. At one point, the particular player he's attacking moves menacingly towards the group, and Takumi and Miles run, Miles being knocked to the ground by the basketball fired at him by the angry player. Miles realizes he's suffered a concussion and is taken to the hospital, where he drifts in and out of consciousness, seeing Lara there with him (see "Quotes," p. 65). The next day, Chip visits and tells him that Sara broke up with him, accusing him of having sex with Alaska. Chip confesses that even though he and Sara never got along, he misses her. Miles, meanwhile, drifts off to sleep.

### Before, Part 4, p. 55 - 66 Analysis

Important elements in this section include Alaska's comment following the encounter with The Eagle at The Smoking Hole, a comment that can be seen as both summing up her basic philosophy and, on a deeper level, the final prank played by Miles, Chip and the others after her death. She personally may have lost the battle (i.e. to live, to survive the labyrinth), but her sense of mischief (i.e. the planned prank she left behind, put into

action in "After, Part 5") ultimately both outlasts and celebrates her. Other important elements include the encounter with the jury (which solidifies the friendships between the four friends and, as such, is an important manifestation of the book's thematic interest in the nature of loyalty) and the development of Miles' relationship with Lara. This last is important for two reasons. One, the sexual and emotional experience he gains with Lara is an important step along his journey of transformation, and two, it adds to his internal conflict over his feelings for/attraction to Alaska.



## Before, Part 5, p. 66 - 82 and Part 6, p. 82-97

### Before, Part 5, p. 66 - 82 and Part 6, p. 82-97 Summary

eighty four days before - A few days after the basketball game, the campus is inundated by a heavy, constant rain that lasts for several days, during which Chip indulges in video games, Miles keeps his distance from Lara, and Alaska keeps her distance from Miles. At one point, he finds her sitting by a window and starts asking her what's going on, but she says she's not in a mood to talk, assuring him that her silence has nothing to do with him.

seventy six days before - One day during the storm, the World Religions class receives the topic for its major project, worth fifty percent of their mark ("What is the most important question human beings must answer? Choose your question wisely, and then examine how Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity attempt to answer it"). That same day, the frantic Alaska reveals to Chip and Miles that the Weekend Warriors have flooded her room by running a hose from a drainpipe through her window. Chip promises revenge.

sixty seven days before - On the day the rain finally ends (see "Quotes," p. 71), Miles talks with Takumi, who reveals that it was Alaska who ratted out Marya and Paul, saying she did so to get out of being expelled by The Eagle after being caught trying to sneak off campus. He also reminds Miles that Chip and Alaska are coming up with a plan for revenge on the Weekend Warriors for flooding Alaska's room, and that the two of them are doubtlessly going to be involved. He makes Miles promise to not rat out Alaska and Chip when the inevitable investigation happens, and Miles realizes that's what the encounter with The Jury was about - Alaska and Chip wanted to convince him that they were trustworthy.

fifty eight days before - One Saturday morning, Miles is awakened by Alaska, who confesses that Takumi was right about her ratting out Marya, and then asks him to stay with her at the school over Thanksgiving. Miles, eager for time alone with her, agrees, later explaining that she doesn't go home because she's "scared of ghosts ... and home is full of them."

fifty two days before - After seeing all their friends off on their Thanksgiving holidays, Alaska and Miles retrieve a hidden bottle of cheap wine and lie looking at the stars. Overcome with emotion, Miles is tempted to speak (see "Quotes," p. 82), but before he can say anything, Alaska starts talking about labyrinths, saying that Bolivar (see "Before, Part 1") was talking about suffering, not about living or dying, adding that there's always suffering. After Miles comments that that's what all the religions discussed by Dr. Hyde are about (i.e. how to survive suffering), the two of them lie silently beside each other. Again Miles almost speaks, but Alaska gently asks him to not spoil the moment.



Before, Part 6, p. 82 - 97

fifty one days before - With a week left of the Thanksgiving holiday, Alaska takes Miles to investigate Kevin's room with the aim of helping her plan her revenge prank. There, she leads him to the discovery that Kevin is very proud of his hair. Leaving the room, she wonders aloud where she can get her hands on some industrial blue dye.

forty nine days before - On the Monday of their holiday, Alaska takes Miles on a tour of some of the other rooms in the residence. They find a pornographic video and watch it, Alaska complaining about how porn objectifies women. Suddenly Alaska falls asleep and Miles, although tempted to lie down with her, goes back to his room (see "Quotes," p. 88).

forty seven days before - Miles and Alaska are on their way to get some lunch when Chip pulls up and tells them his mother couldn't stand the thought of them being alone for the holiday and has invited them to dinner. After telling The Eagle where they're going Miles and Alaska head off, with Miles surprised to see the poverty in which Chip and his mother live. That night, Chip's mother insists that Miles and Alaska sleep in the bed, and Miles lies awake, fully aware of how close Alaska is to him.

forty six days before - The next day is Thanksgiving, and the meal is great, with everyone afterwards expressing their various gratitude. That night, Miles sits in the back of Chip's car, heading for what he now thinks of as home ... the school.

forty four days before - After they go on a playful visit to a local store to buy some liquor, Miles is surprised when Alaska turns up in his room in tears, confessing that she told Chip about ratting out Marya and that he afterwards said she couldn't be trusted. Miles tries to comfort her, but she berates herself for messing everything up, telling Miles that he loves what he sees of her, not who she truly is.

christmas - Miles, like all the other kids (even Alaska) goes home for Christmas holidays. When Miles is ready to go back to school, his parents both cry, assuring Miles they miss him and are proud of him. Miles says he too felt like crying, grateful that he had "a family."

## **Before, Part 5, p. 66 - 82 and Part 6, p. 82-97 Analysis**

The novel's thematic interest in the nature and importance of loyalty plays out on a couple of important levels in this section. The first is the attack of the Weekend Warriors on Alaska (a manifestation of their loyalty to their friends), while the second is Takumi's warning to Miles that whatever Alaska and Chip do in revenge, his (Miles') loyalty is to them, just as theirs was to him on the group's jury appearance. Other important elements include the deepening relationship between Alaska and Miles (with developments here foreshadowing events at the end of "Before, Part 8") and the presentation of Dr. Hyde's exam question. This, in turn, foreshadows both Hyde's presentation of Alaska's answer (see "After, Part 2") and his presentation of his next exam question (see "After, Part 6"). Then there is Alaska's cryptic reference to the



ghosts at home, one of the most vivid examples in the narrative of one of the things about Alaska that both Chip and Miles, as they reveal in the "After" section, find both irritating and fascinating - her habit of dropping mysterious hints about herself in order to make herself more interesting. The comment also foreshadows her revelations in "Before, Part 8" that indicate just what those ghosts actually are. Finally, there is Alaska's reference to what she believes to be the real nature of the question posed by Simon Bolivar (see "Before, Part 1"), her comments forming an important component of the novel's thematic considerations of the meaning of both life and death.

There are several important points to note in this section. These include Miles' perhaps contradictory experiences of home and family - the home he shares with his friends at the school, the family home he has with his parents. It's interesting to note that the narrative makes no clear suggestion as to which one he prefers, or which experience of home is the more valid. What the portrayal of the two "homes" does suggest, however, is that feeling welcome, feeling accepted, and feeling just plain liked is as much a component of being "home" as a biological relationship with the others who live there. In this context it's also important to consider his experience of Chip's home - uncomfortable and challenging physical circumstances (i.e. life being lived in a run down, crowded trailer) contrasted with obviously mutual love, affection and respect between Chip and his mother. All these experiences of home are an interesting, telling contrast to the picture that the ever enigmatic Alaska paints of HER home life, the unhappiness of which is explained in "Before, Part 8" which may, in turn, be a contributing factor to her possibly being suicidal.

Other important points in this section include the references to Kevin's hair and to blue dye, both of which foreshadow the playing of Chip and Alaska's next prank in the following section, and the reference to pornography objectifying women. This, in fact, is a frequently repeated motif (aspect/image) in Alaska's character, the idea that she feels strongly about how women are treated and is prepared to fight to change the attitudes that lead to such treatment. Presentations of this motif here and elsewhere foreshadow the final prank, played as a memorial to Alaska in the final moments of the book and The Eagle's commentary that he could clearly see her hand in that prank even as it is being played out.

Finally, there is the conversation between Alaska and Miles about Alaska's telling the truth about Marya and Paul to Chip, a test of the loyalty between Alaska and Chip that once again manifests the novel's thematic interest in the nature and value of loyalty.



## Before, Part 7, p. 97 - 111

### Before, Part 7, p. 97 - 111 Summary

eight days before - shortly after returning from Christmas, Alaska announces her intention to stage a pre-prank before the big prank on Kevin and his allies, the point being to fool The Eagle into thinking the year's major prank had already taken place. When Miles asks what the pre-prank might involve, Alaska tells him that she'll plan it with Chip. The angry Miles goes off alone, jealous that after spending so much time with Alaska at Thanksgiving, she seems to still prefer the company of Chip (see "Quotes," p. 99).

four days before - While Alaska and Chip continue to plan the pre-prank, which they've named Barn Night, Miles prepares for his exams and finishes his World Religions project. His question: what happens after death? He compares the beliefs of the various religions studied in class, and writes in his conclusion his reasoning for suggesting that the question is an important one (see "Quotes," p. 100).

three days before - After lying their way past The Eagle, who believes their story of going to visit Chip's mother, Miles and Takumi join Chip, Alaska and Lara in a ramshackle barn on the school grounds. There, Chip reveals the details of the plan, the role of each individual in the plan, and the necessary timing of each part of the plan. The team splits up and puts the plan into action. Miles and Takumi distract The Eagle by leaving a string of fireworks across the school grounds while Lara pours dye into the hair products of Kevin and his friends. Meanwhile, Chip and Alaska hack into the school's computer system, sending false reports of bad grades not only to the parents of Kevin and his friends but, in a bit of Alaska's improvisation that worries Chip, also to the parents of twenty-three other Weekend Warriors. Once everything has been accomplished, the five friends reunite in the barn, vent their anger at the Weekend Warriors, and settle in for a couple of days, Miles both worried and excited about what's just happened and the consequences they might face.

### Before, Part 7, p. 97 - 111 Analysis

The primary focus of this section is the preparation and enactment of Alaska's "pre-prank", in which she and her allies kill two birds with one stone - take revenge on Kevin for the prank he and his friends played on Alaska, and pave the way for the big end-of-year prank. The novel's thematic exploration of the nature and value of loyalty continues in this section, as the success of the prank firmly depends on both the friends' loyalty to each other and to their shared purpose (i.e. getting revenge on the Weekend Warriors). Also in this section, and through the medium of Hyde's World Religions class, the narrative continues its exploration into the larger questions of existence, namely life and death. This exploration manifests in Miles' consideration of Hyde's exam topic and his answer to the exam question. Both the question and the answer can be seen as



foreshadowing both the events of the "After" section of the book and Miles' reaction to and interpretation of those events.

Finally, it's important to note that the results of Alaska's improvised addition to the plan (the sending of false reports) is never discussed or revealed anywhere in the narrative. There is a reference to one of the Weekend Warriors whose parents received the report, but there's no commentary on what transpired. It is, in short, a prank with no consequences ... it's tempting to imagine, though, what those consequences might have been.



## Before, Part 8, p. 111 - 133

### Before, Part 8, p. 111 - 133 Summary

two days before - The day after Barn Night, the five friends fill the time by playing a game invented by Alaska called "Best Day, Worst Day" in which everyone has to tell a story about his or her best and worst days. In the Best Day round, the stories are, for Miles, THIS day, Alaska's trip to the zoo with her mother when she was eight, Lara being the interpreter when her family moved to America (because she was the only one who spoke English), and Takumi's losing his virginity. For Chip, the best day is in the future - the day he buys his mother a nice house. For the worst day, the stories are, for Takumi, the day he watched his dead grandmother's body burn on a funeral pyre, a school humiliation for Miles, and the same arrival day for Lara (which was the day, she says, she left her childhood behind). For Chip it's the day his father left after physically abusing his mother. For Alaska, it's the day after the trip to the zoo, when her mother suffered a brain aneurysm and then lapsed into unconsciousness, the eight year old Alaska thinking that whatever was bothering her had stopped and not calling 911. This story wins, and Miles realizes that this event is the root of Alaska's being convinced that she messes everything up. That night, after everyone has gotten drunk on cheap wine, Miles and Lara make out, ending up sleeping in Lara's sleeping bag ... the end of Miles' best day.

one day before - The morning after Miles' best day, he and the other four make their hung-over way back to the school. There, Miles and Chip check in with The Eagle, who doesn't seem to suspect anything. They then go back to their dorm room, Miles commenting that he should have "done extraordinary things," but instead slept eighteen hours.

the last day - The next morning, Kevin visits Miles and Chip, his hair short and still showing traces of blue. Conversation reveals that he knows they are responsible for the sabotage on his hair and that as far as Chip is concerned, there is no truce. In the evening, Miles and Chip visit Alaska to toast their Barn Night success, but while Chip and Alaska get drunk Miles does not. Alaska decides to play "Truth or Dare," daring Miles to make out with her, which he does. They stop before actual penetration occurs because Alaska feels sleepy. Miles too falls asleep, waking up when the communal pay phone in the hall rings. Alaska goes out to answer it, and comes back in a moment later shouting at herself for messing things up and desperate to leave. Chip and Miles agree to help her get away, setting off fireworks leftover from Barn Night and distracting The Eagle while Alaska drives away, Miles commenting in narration that none of them really thought about what they were doing (see "Quotes," p. 132). Afterwards, the guys return to their dorm room and go to sleep.



## Before, Part 8, p. 111 - 133 Analysis

The action of this section builds to the climax of the "Before" part of the novel, that climax being Alaska's hurried, drunken, emotional departure (the center of the narrative labyrinth through which the characters have been moving throughout "Before" - see "Style - Structure"). As part of that buildup, the particularly noteworthy scene is the "Best Day, Worst Day" game, in which Alaska reveals important information about herself and why she feels like she messes up all the time. This information, along with the description of events around the phone call, are both important pieces of the puzzle that Miles and Chip find themselves trying to put together throughout the second half of the book (that is, the "After" section).

Other important elements include the growing intimacy between Miles and Lara, which becomes an important secondary element in the "After" part of the novel, in that Miles' guilt over "betraying" Lara with Alaska colors his reactions to Lara in the aftermath of Alaska's death. Miles' experience with Alaska is itself an extremely important element, in that it too serves as a climax of sorts, the high point of Miles' intense emotional and physical attraction to Alaska. As the result of their encounter here Miles, as Chip points out later, constructs a fantasy about what his relationship with Alaska both was and could have been, a fantasy that gets in the way as Miles' struggles to cope with Alaska's death. Or, to look at the situation in a way that connects with Dr. Hyde's earlier suggestion that Miles be where he is in the moment ("Before, Part 3"), Miles' stubborn embracing of his fantasy about Alaska takes him out of the truth of the admittedly difficult moments after her death.

One final noteworthy element of this section is the quote from p. 132, which clearly and vividly suggests that something awful is about to happen to Alaska. The nature of that something is revealed in the following section.



# After, Part 1, p. 137 - 157

## After, Part 1, p. 137 - 157 Summary

the day after - The next morning, the hung-over Miles and Chip are summoned to the gym. When they arrive, they discover that Alaska is not there. The Eagle announces that Alaska died the night before, when the car she was driving collided with a police car guarding a jackknifed truck. Remembering their intimacy, Miles runs out of the auditorium to throw up, (see "Quotes," p. 140). Later, present tense narration describes how the grieving and sorrowful Chip and Miles walk back to their dorm, Miles contemplating how he'll never know Alaska's last words.

two days after - Conversations between Miles and Chip result in the latter venting his frustration and anger and revealing his guilt over both getting drunk with Alaska and not stopping her. He eventually stalks out. Visits from other friends (including Lara, whom he doesn't tell about his intimacy with Alaska) offer Miles no comfort. Present tense narration describes Miles' dream that night - of being visited by a nude and playfully vulnerable Alaska, who lies on top of him and then disintegrates into a rotting, shattered corpse.

four days after - After being gone for almost two days, Chip returns early in the morning, revealing that he had walked for dozens of miles and that he's having difficulty remembering what Alaska looked like, commenting that he was fed up with Alaska's moodiness and self-conscious mysteriousness.

six days after - On the day of Alaska's funeral, Miles rides with Chip and Lara as Takumi drives them in his SUV, avoiding the scene of the crash. When they arrive at the chapel in Alaska's home town they encounter her father, kneeling at the side of the closed casket. When Miles asks why it's closed, Alaska's father says it's because after her mother's open casket funeral, Alaska insisted that she not be seen in hers. After Alaska's father leaves, Miles then goes to kneel by the casket, Chip standing with him and apologizing (see "Quotes," p. 152), saying he knows Miles loved her. Miles insists that for him, love still exists in the present tense.

seven days after - Chip tells Miles that The Eagle asked whether he and Miles had set off the fireworks that distracted him on the day Alaska died, adding that he (Chip) had said nothing. He also says The Eagle told him to go through Alaska's room and remove anything that shouldn't be found. When Chip and Miles search the room, Miles is overwhelmed by the scents and the memories as he looks for "The General in His Labyrinth," which is eventually found by Chip. Miles looks for the closing quote (see "Before, Part 1") and then discovers that Alaska had, next to the quote, written in the words "Straight and Fast," which Chip takes to mean that Alaska, drunk and angry and upset, ran her car "straight and fast" into the police car in order to get out of her "labyrinth of suffering." In other words, she killed herself. Miles refuses to believe it, remembering that after they had made out (see "Before, Part 8") she had whispered "to



be continued." He and Chip return to their room, Miles aware that they both feel guilty for what they see as causing her death.

## **After, Part 1, p. 137 - 157 Analysis**

Both the tone and narrative focus of the novel shift quite dramatically in the "After" section. The playfulness of the first section is replaced by an intense, weighty grief, while the basis of the plot transforms from Miles's search for The Great Perhaps (which he believed he found embodied in Alaska) becomes a search for the truth of what happened the night of Alaska's death. The beginning of that search is marked by the discovery of Alaska's "Straight and Fast" note which leads both Miles and Chip into consideration of the idea that she committed suicide. Their impulsive consideration of this idea (juxtaposed as it is with Miles' belief that her comment "to be continued" meant that she wanted to live) leads to further, and deeper considerations of both Alaska's life and death in forthcoming sections of the book. These considerations are, in turn, the primary focus of the novel's overall thematic emphasis on questions associated with the nature and meaning of existence.

Other important elements in this section include Miles' somewhat insensitive treatment of Lara, which foreshadows further deterioration in their relationship and also his deepening involvement in the fantasy about what his being intimate with Alaska actually meant, and the reference to Alaska's mother's casket. This reminds the reader of the trauma Alaska experienced as the result of her mother's death, an experience which plays an important role in the eventual (but partial) unraveling of what happened the night Alaska died.



## After, Part 2, p. 157 - 173

### After, Part 2, p. 157 - 173 Summary

eight days after - When classes resume, the atmosphere has changed - everyone is much quieter, and Miles notices the silence that used to be filled by the talkative Alaska. In World Religion class, Dr. Hyde posts the question Alaska asked in her final on the board - "How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" - and says it will remain on the board for the whole semester (see "Quotes," p, 158).

nine days after - Chip develops a theory about how Alaska died. Upset over what happened with Miles, he says, the mysterious phone call (which Chip thinks was from Jake) triggered her to take off. He suggests that she discovered an opportunity to take the "straight and fast" way out of her labyrinth of suffering, and did so. He then reveals his plan for finding out the truth. Miles says he doesn't want to know, he's too upset. Chip tells him to get over himself and "think about your dead friend."

thirteen days after - Miles and Chip talk to the police officer driving the car that Alaska ran into. He reveals how quickly and recklessly she was driving, the exact level of her blood alcohol content (which was far over the legal limit), and that she had some white plastic tulips in the back seat of her car, which Miles recognizes as having been given to her by Jake. After they thank the officer and leave, Chip describes how Alaska once told him that "her parents always put white flowers in her hair when she was little. Maybe she wanted to die with white flowers." Miles comments that he can't believe she actually committed suicide because that would make her "a selfish bitch." Chip comments that Miles seems to be only able to remember "the Alaska [he] made up." He goes on to say that all he wants is for him and Miles to be normal again. They go back to the school to research suicide.

fourteen days after - After researching signs of suicide online, Miles and Chip discuss how Alaska didn't seem to display any of the usual signs, and that therefore her death was probably not a suicide.

twenty days after - Miles and Chip argue about asking Jake if he knows anything about the night Alaska died, with Chip again accusing Miles of only caring about his fantasy of Alaska loving him. Miles storms off and heads for the Smoking Hole, where he screams out his frustration and then thinks about what Chip said, realizing he's right and that he's furious with Alaska (see "Quotes," p. 172). Back in the dorm room, he and Chip quickly apologize to each other, Chip saying they don't have to talk with Jake right away - he's got another idea.

### After, Part 2, p. 157 - 173 Analysis

The sensations of guilt and grief and loss deepen in this section, as both Miles and Chip begin to realize just how profoundly and pervasively Alaska's death is being felt not just



by themselves but by others. As part of their realizations, and perhaps in an effort to ease the intensity of their grief, the organized Chip leads an investigation into events the night of her death, at the same time as he makes the first of several very pointed comments about Miles' feelings. He suggests here and throughout the remainder of this section that Miles is being both selfish (thinking he was the only one who cared deeply) and deluded (thinking that his being with Alaska meant more than it actually did). It takes a while, but eventually Miles comes to realize that Chip is right, an important step on his journey of transformation.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include Chip and Miles' discoveries about the circumstances of Alaska's death (the white flowers and Chip's recollection of Alaska's comments are particularly important clues), and Dr. Hyde's perhaps surprising sensitivity to Alaska and her situation. His posting of her question suggests he had at least some respect for who she really was, how she thought, and why she both felt and wrote the way she did. His putting the question on the board also foreshadows the point later in the narrative ("After, Part 6") in which he assigns contemplation of Alaska's question as his students' final exam. Finally, there is the research done by Chip and Miles on suicide, the results of which are fully printed in the narrative (perhaps as a suggestion to teen readers that they be aware of the signs of suicide in their friends). It's important to note, however, that neither their research nor their conclusions dispel the validity of Chip's idea that she decided to take the "straight and fast" way out of her painful life on impulse.



## After, Part 3, p. 173 - 191

### After, Part 3, p. 173 - 191 Summary

twenty one days after - Reading about a passionate female Muslim saint makes Miles think about Alaska's interest in strong women and his own beliefs about the afterlife. Later, while having lunch with Takumi, they both talk about how much they miss Alaska, Miles commenting in narration how frustrating it is that he won't tell Takumi everything that happened the night she died.

twenty seven days after - After getting some alcohol from Takumi and sneakily borrowing The Eagle's personal breathalyzer, Chip and Miles conduct an experiment to find out just how drunk Alaska was. Their late night research is interrupted by The Eagle knocking on their door. Miles, thinking fast, starts smoking and tells Chip to pretend to cry. Then, when The Eagle comes in, Miles says he's smoking so he can stay up all night to keep the overwrought Chip company. The Eagle accepts the story, but says that he (Miles) will still face The Jury the next day. After The Eagle goes, Chip drinks his way to Alaska's blood alcohol level (as identified by the breathalyzer), and he and Miles realize that even that drunk, driving accidentally into a police car was unlikely. They resolve to continue their investigations.

twenty eight days after - The next day, as he copes with a bad hangover, Chip tells Takumi everything about the night Alaska died except that she and Miles made out. Takumi comments that he, like them, let her go. But before he gets a chance to explain, Chip announces the next phase of the plan - talking to Jake.

twenty nine days after - Chip reveals what Jake said - that he was the caller that night, that he called Alaska (who said she had been doodling during their conversation) to say happy anniversary of their first date, that in the middle of the conversation Alaska freaked out, and that she said she'd talk to him (not see him) later. This, Chip comments, suggests, along with Miles' comment that their relationship was "to be continued," that she wasn't thinking of killing herself. The three guys then go over everything that happened that evening, realizing that "something inside her" triggered her during the phone call and made her extremely upset.

thirty seven days after - Several days later, Miles collides with Lara in the hall and realizes she's angry with him. He explains in narration that after Alaska died, he only had room for one true want, and she was dead, and I wanted to know the how and why of it, and Lara couldn't tell him, and "that was all that mattered."

forty five days after - Desperate for cigarettes Miles, Chip and Takumi go to Alaska's favorite shop. After getting the cigarettes and as they're driving back to the school, Miles notices Chip letting the breeze from the open window blow in his face.





forty six days after - Takumi talks Miles into talking with Lara, who accepts his explanation of why he behaved so stupidly and hasn't talked to her (see "Quotes," p. 192). Later, the two of them go to The Smoking Hole with Chip and Takumi. Before he lights his cigarette, Chip throws one into the water - a tribute, he says, to Alaska. The others follow suit, and Miles realizes Chip has had a good idea (see "Quotes," p. 193). As a result of their conversation, Miles again realizes that he isn't the only one who cared for Alaska.

## **After, Part 3, p. 173 - 191 Analysis**

As Chip and Miles continue with their investigation, important clues are both gathered and missed. The former includes their discovery about Alaska's blood alcohol content (which doesn't completely resolve the suicide/accident question) and Jake's remembrances of what happened. The latter includes Takumi's comment that he too feels guilty about something that happened that night, the full truth of which is revealed in "After, Part 6," which makes Takumi's comment here an important piece of foreshadowing. Another significant piece of foreshadowing is the comment about Alaska feeling "something inside" that triggered her upset and potential suicide, that "something" being revealed in "After, Part 6." One last piece of important foreshadowing occurs in juxtaposition with one of the novel's few uses of metaphor in its narration. This is Chip's face being blown by the breeze, an image that itself suggests freedom and joy and which, in the context of the narrative as a whole and this section of the narrative in particular, suggests that both freedom (from grief and guilt) and joy (in happy memories) are both forthcoming. The image, in other words, is foreshadowing of the release from the metaphorical labyrinth of grief, guilt and delusion in which Miles and Chip find themselves as a result of Alaska's death, a release which, interestingly enough, occurs while Miles and Chip are again out driving (see "After, Part 6").

Other meaningful elements include the commentary about the female Muslim saint (who, Miles says in narration, wanted people to love God for his own sake without any fear of hell or hope of heaven) and the difficult relationship between Miles and Lara. The tension between them is eventually resolved when Miles is finally honest with both her and with himself about his feelings for Alaska and how those feelings made him behave. In other words, he is getting rid of the delusion that their intimacy meant that they were involved more than they actually were, making his way slowly out of the complicated, guilt-ridden labyrinth of emotions and uncertainty in which he found himself after Alaska's death.



## After, Part 4, 191 - 210

### After, Part 4, 191 - 210 Summary

fifty one days after - During discussion in World Religions class about the Zen principle that "everything that comes together falls apart," Miles realizes that that applied to Alaska, it applies to him, and it applies to his memories of and his love for Alaska. As he contemplates this, he wonders whether he is ever going to get an answer about why she died, and also realizes that, unlike Chip (who seems to have given up wanting to know) he, Miles, still NEEDS to know.

sixty two days after - During a conversation with his mother on the communal pay phone, Miles notices a flower doodled on the white paint of the wall. This triggers several recollections - that Jake had said Alaska had talked about doodling during their phone call ("After, Part 3"), that Alaska had white flowers in the back of the car the night she died ("After, Part 2"), and that Chip said something about Alaska being given white flowers when she was a girl (again, "After, Part 2"). Miles abruptly hangs up on his mom and then rushes to get Chip to show him the doodle, saying that it must have made her "remember whatever she'd forgotten, and then freaked out." The strangely calm Chip tells him that while that may be true, they still don't know WHAT she remembered.

sixty nine days after - As spring arrives, Chip suggests to Miles that they memorialize Alaska through a major prank, adding that Alaska gave him an idea ("Subverting the Patriarchal Paradigm") before she died. After Chip outlines it to him (with Miles' narration not revealing what he says), Miles agrees it's an amazing idea.

eighty three days after - Chip spends two weeks making detailed plans, and calls a meeting of Takumi, Lara and Miles to discuss them, commenting afterwards that it will work only if they can find a stripper and if Miles can "work some magic with his dad."

eighty four days after - Miles talks his dad (who has memories of his own pranks at the school) into impersonating "Dr. William Morse," an expert in adolescent sexuality and the proposed guest for Speaker's Day, an annual (and annually boring) event at the school. Miles then enlists the aid of one of the Weekend Warriors, and they tell The Eagle about their choice. The Eagle calls to confirm "Dr. Morse's" participation.

one hundred two days after - Chip tracks down an agency willing to help with the prank, that agency putting him in touch with a stripper named Maxx. On the day of the prank, Maxx is late, but eventually arrives. Miles walks him into the gym, where all the other students have assembled. With Takumi ready to readjust the sound system and Lara waiting for her cue, The Eagle introduces "Dr. Morse," who reads the speech prepared for him by the pranksters about sexual objectification of the genders. Lara interrupts, says he's hot, and demands that he take off his clothes. At first "Dr. Morse" refuses, but then says because part of his job is to "subvert the patriarchal paradigm" agrees. He shouts, "This is for Alaska Young," Takumi starts the music, and Maxx rips off his



clothes. To shouts and whoops from the students, he starts to dance, stopping when The Eagle gestures for him to leave. Afterwards several students ask whether Miles was behind the prank, and he takes pride in saying it was Alaska's idea. That night Miles, Chip, Takumi and Lara are celebrating in Chip and Miles' room when they are visited by The Eagle, who, unexpectedly, comments that the speech might have been written by Alaska herself.

one hundred fourteen days after - A few days later, Takumi realizes that Alaska died on the anniversary of her mother's death. He reminds Miles and Chip, who theorize that that's what she remembered while doodling on the phone with Jake, felt guilty, grabbed the white flowers, and raced off, probably to visit her mom's grave. While en route, they think, she either thought she could get past the police car and missed, or she felt so bad about missing the anniversary and messing up again that she drove her car into the police car on purpose. Chip comments ironically "Well ... that clears things up nicely."

## After, Part 4, 191 - 210 Analysis

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# After, Part 5, p. 210 - 221

## After, Part 5, p. 210 - 221 Summary

one hundred eighteen days after - Miles and Chip decide to drive along the highway where Alaska died, mostly quiet except for a brief conversation in which they each reveal that Alaska's death felt, and feels, pure and right. They approach a part of the highway where shattered glass from Alaska's accident remains scattered on the road. Chip speeds up, and Miles realizes that Alaska may have suddenly decided to end her suffering "straight and fast" on impulse. In present tense narration, Miles describes how he and Chip pass over the spot, driving straight and fast ... and weeping. Resuming past tense narration, Miles describes how they stopped, got out, embraced each other, wept some more, and celebrated being alive.

one hundred nineteen days after - Chip and Miles, along with Takumi and Lara, study intensely for their exams. They miss Alaska, but none of them talk much.

one hundred twenty two days after - In handing out his final exam, Dr. Hyde asks his students to discuss their answer to Alaska's question (see "After, Part 2") and to relate their answer to what they have come to understand about the three religions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism) they've been studying ... religions, he adds, that are all defined by hope. What, he asks, is the student's cause for hope?

one hundred thirty six days after - On the last day of classes, after writing his last exam, Miles comes back to his dorm room to find a letter from Takumi in which he says that he angrily kept some information back from Chip and Miles about the night Alaska died because they had kept him out of their investigation. He says that because he is no longer angry, he is offering that information - that he saw Alaska as she left the campus, that she explained that she had forgotten the anniversary of her mother's death, and that he didn't realize she planned to visit her mother's grave. He too, he says, feels guilty about his role in what happened. After reading the letter, Miles comes to terms with the fact that he will never know why Alaska died, and then sits down to write his way "out of the labyrinth."

Miles says, in his essay for Dr. Hyde, that he came to the school looking for a Great Perhaps, found it in Alaska, and then lost it. He also describes his realization that she was something more than the sum of her parts (i.e. her physical life, her memories, her feelings), and that "something more" is both indestructible and eternal. He comments that he feels she has forgiven him and the others for their role in her death, and that he has forgiven her for dying. He concludes by quoting the last words of Thomas Edison: "It's very beautiful over there," adding that he doesn't know where "there" is, but that he believes "it's somewhere, and I hope it's beautiful."



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# Characters

## Miles Halter

Teenaged Miles is the book's central character, its protagonist and narrator (for consideration of the metaphorical and/or symbolic implications of his name, see "Topics for Discussion - What are the symbolic and/or metaphoric values ..."). He is described as tall and slender to the point of being skinny, which is what makes the nickname "Pudge," given to him by his roommate Chip (see below), profoundly ironic. From the beginning of the novel he is portrayed as being realistic almost to the point of being cynical, a follower rather than a leader, somewhat eccentric in his interests (he is fascinated by the last words of the dying) and, perhaps most importantly, as desperate for something more than what he calls his "minor life." When he goes away to boarding school, he makes friends (and becomes attracted to) a beautiful woman who, it could be argued, lives a major life - the mercurial, temperamental, volatile Alaska, someone whose attitudes and actions change Miles' life forever, for better or for worse. Over the course of the narrative, as a direct result of his relationship with Alaska and with other friends he makes at school, Miles undergoes a significant journey of transformation. He evolves from someone with little or no emotional experience and little or no capacity for daring and/or adventure into someone who, as the result of being LED on adventures by Alaska and Chip, into someone with experiences of and perspectives on both life and death he never thought possible. He is, in short, an intriguing and engaging character, a geek with a longing, growing, strengthening heart and soul.

## Chip (The Colonel)

Chip is Miles' roommate, the first person he meets when he arrives at his new school. Chip is, in many ways, a complete contrast to Miles - short and muscular (where Miles is tall and skinny) adventurous and daring (where Miles tends to be timid and restrained), a planner and schemer (where Miles tends to be reactive) and, above all, commanding and determined (hence his nickname, The Colonel). There is one other particularly noteworthy difference between the two characters. Chip, for all his bravado and outward shows of confidence, is far more emotionally self-attuned and vulnerable than Miles is. Chip knows what his feelings are, is not afraid of them, and is not afraid to express them. Miles, in some ways, learns about feelings, his own and others, from watching and being around Chip and Alaska both. This is another way in which Chip is a leader - he leads, but at times simply accompanies, Miles through the labyrinth (see "Objects/Places") of emotion that results from coming to know themselves and Alaska, the latter in terms of both her life and her death.



## Alaska

The vividly portrayed Alaska is a beautiful, vivacious, uninhibited, determined young woman whose outward shows of playfulness and carefree-ness mask a profound lack of self-worth, an intense self-doubt. She is, in some ways, a leader like Chip, but an impulse-driven one rather than a planner like him. She takes an immediate interest in Miles when he arrives, but is clearly portrayed as finding him interesting and charming as opposed to sexually and/or emotionally attractive - in other words, she's interested in him as a friend, as someone with whom to explore life, as opposed to someone to fall in love with. All that said, however, Alaska is also portrayed as being deeply troubled, the source of that troubled side being only hinted at through much of the first part of the novel but more fully revealed in the drunken aftermath of the Barn Night prank (see "Before, Part 8"). The experiences she describes at that point are the primary reason why, at the conclusion of the "Before" section, she disappears into the night and ends up dead as the result of a car crash. Her reasons for doing what she did that night are investigated and discovered, at least to a point, by Miles and Chip, but the deeper truth of what happened in her very last moments is never revealed ... in other words Alaska dies as mysteriously as she often lived. See "Topics for Discussion - Do you think Alaska's death ..."

## Takumi

Japanese student Takumi attends the same school as Miles, Chip and Alaska. He, like Miles, is a follower rather than a leader. While his reasons for hanging out with Chip and Alaska are never fully defined, there is the sense that he feels like something of an outsider at the school, and hangs out with them because he makes them feel more welcome than the other students. Like Miles and Chip, he blames himself for Alaska's death, but there is the sense that, UN-like Miles and Chip, he doesn't really come to terms with either what happened or his sense of responsibility.

## Lara

Lara is a Rumanian student at the school. Pretty and speaking with a slight accent, she too is something of an outsider in the school, and becomes involved with Chip and Alaska for similar reasons to Miles and Takumi. She also becomes emotionally involved with Miles, with the narrative suggesting that it's not as much because they're attracted to each other as it is the simple fact that they're there and they're lonely. In the face of Miles' grief and his confession of attraction to and desire for Alaska, Lara is forgiving and compassionate, an important trigger for Miles' eventual self-forgiveness.

## Dr. Hyde

The elderly Dr. Hyde teaches Miles' favorite class, World Religions. Hyde's teaching methods and the content of his classes are important triggers for the self-realizations





Miles comes to over the course of the narrative. Hyde displays an unexpectedly sensitive and wise side to himself when he pays tribute to Alaska after her death and uses her contributions to class as tools for instructing students in the ways of both life and philosophy.

## **Mr. Starnes (The Eagle)**

Starnes is the dorm supervisor at the school, watchful and strict. His presence, and the threat of punishment for transgressions implied in that presence, is constantly in the background of every adventure, trick, prank, or transgression of the rules undertaken by Chip, Alaska and the others. He, like Dr. Hyde, reveals an unexpectedly compassionate side in the aftermath of Alaska's death, smilingly acknowledging the role she and her beliefs played in the final prank played by Chip, Miles and the others (see "After, Part 4").

## **Jake**

Jake is Alaska's athletic boyfriend, affable and affectionate. The information he provides about his last telephone conversation with her helps Miles and Chip discover, at least to some degree, what happened on the night of her death.

## **The**

The "Weekend Warriors" are rich kids who attend the school during the week but go home to their wealthy parents at the weekend. They consider themselves better than the full-time boarders and are reviled by the full-timers, particularly Chip and Alaska, who are frequently on the receiving end of their taunts and pranks.

## **Kevin, Sara**

Kevin and Sara are two Weekend Warriors who make life miserable for Miles, Chip and the other students. Kevin is the ringleader of the intense hazing that Miles undergoes when he first arrives. Sara is Chip's judgmental girlfriend, demanding and selfish.

## **Maxx**

Maxx is the professional name of the (male) stripper hired by Miles, Chip and the others to help them stage Alaska's last prank. His real name is Stan, and he proves himself to be more than willing and able to participate in their plan.

## Miles' Parents

Miles' parents appear on only a few occasions in the novel, but are portrayed as well meaning and affectionate. Miles mother comes across as somewhat flighty and sentimental, while his father is portrayed as going along for her ride, but with a subversive sense of humor and mischief all his own. There is the sense that in the aftermath of everything that happens to Miles, he is going to end up more like his dad than his mom.



# Objects/Places

## Florida

Miles and his family make their home in Florida. The fact that Miles can't wait to leave Florida to go to boarding school has less to do with the state itself than it has to do with feeling like his life there doesn't offer him enough.

## Alabama

Alabama is the state in which Miles' new school is located. He discovers as soon as he arrives there that the weather (intensely hot and humid) is a significant challenge, but one that he eventually becomes able to accommodate.

## Birmingham

This city in Alabama is where the boarding school attended by Miles, Chip and the others is located.

## Culver Creek Preparatory School

This is the private boarding school that Miles chooses to attend, where he makes what seems to be his first real friends, and where he has important, even traumatic experiences that change his life.

## The Great Perhaps

This is the term used by Miles to describe his reasons for going to boarding school to his parents - he is looking for something more than his "minor life," possibility and freedom. The term is taken from the last words of French philosopher and writer Francois Rabelais, whose writing often explored and embraced the possibilities and values of living a full, adventurous, questing life.

## The General in His Labyrinth

Alaska's interest in this book about Mexican revolutionary Simon Bolivar is centered on his perhaps fictionalized last words (see "Before, Part 1"), those words forming the basis of both her personal search for meaning in her life and Miles' eventual search for a way out of his grief at her death.



## Labyrinths

"Labyrinth" is, in many ways, another word for "maze," a puzzle in the form of a walkable path that weaves its way through walls, corners, turnings, misdirections and re-directions into a central point. Both the term and the concept originated in Ancient Greece in the myth of Theseus, whose survival of a monster-filled labyrinth is expressive of an archetypal experience embodied and/or manifested in all labyrinths - a questing search through the unknown for truth, often frightening, that must be encountered and survived. Over the centuries, labyrinths have become a frequently used tool for enabling and/or triggering meditation, again with the same purpose - to search through the hidden and unknown (in this case of the psyche of the person walking through the labyrinth) for meaning and insight. See "Topics for Discussion - Research and discuss..." and "Search out a labyrinth ..."

## The Smoking Hole

This semi-secret, semi-hidden grove by a river in the grounds of the school is where Miles, Chip and the others gather to smoke, drink, talk and escape from the pressures of their school life. Throughout the narrative, several important conversations and confrontations happen here, including a ritualized tribute to Alaska at the end of the book.

## The Old Barn

After completing the prank code-named Barn Night Miles, Chip and the others gather here while waiting for the excitement of their prank to die down. The barn is the setting for the game of "Best Day, Worst Day," in which each of the friends reveals important aspects of their lives. It's also the setting for Miles and Lara's taking their relationship to a new level.

## The Dorm Rooms

The most noteworthy aspect of Alaska's dorm room (where several important scenes and confrontations in the book take place) is that it is filled with books, indicating Alaska's love for reading and search for knowledge. By contrast, Miles' and Chip's dorm room is simply a place where they sleep, smoke and drink in secret, and do homework. It's interesting to note that while they are roommates, and while most of the other students also have roommates, Alaska is in her room alone. On a literal level, this is because her roommate has been kicked out for misbehaving. There is, perhaps, another (and more metaphorical) value to her living alone - to reinforce the idea that she essentially feels alone in her life because she is, as she says, such a "fuck up."



## **Alaska's Doodles**

Alaska's habit of doodling while she talks, and in particular her doodling while she's talking on the phone, is an important clue that leads Miles and Chip to some degree of understanding why and how she died.

## **The White Flowers**

A bouquet of white plastic flowers given to Alaska by Jake is found in the back seat of the car in which Alaska dies. This, combined with Chip's memory of Alaska talking about white flowers given to her by her mother, and the white flower doodled by the phone, all combine to again give Miles and Chip insight into what happened the night of Alaska's death.



# Themes

## The Search for

At the end of Chapter 1, when explaining why he wants to attend boarding school to his parents, Miles says he's searching for "The Great Perhaps", and quotes the last words of French writer Francois Rabelais who lived and wrote during the turn of the 14th/15th Centuries. Rabelais (a pseudonym) was a former monk who, after leaving holy orders, embraced a life of humanism, of celebrating the pleasures of being alive. He poked satirical fun at the sort of self-restraint he left behind in the church and urged those who read his work to let themselves enjoy what there was/is to be enjoyed, and to embrace the possibilities of life rather than restrict themselves to narrow definitions of what was right and proper. His last words, as quoted by Miles at the end of Chapter 1 in explanation of his decision, were "I go to seek a Great Perhaps" - in other words, the ultimate in possibility, whatever awaits the soul after death. Miles, for his part, is determined to explore the Great Perhaps in his life, and finds an ally in that exploration in Alaska, who seems to have fully embraced both the suffering and the joy that comes with such an exploration. Miles' actions over the course of the entire narrative follow a similar pattern, as he searches for possibilities for fuller experience in both life and, after Alaska is killed, in both her death and in her reaction to her death.

## The Mysteries of Life and Death

The search for the Great Perhaps is the "what" of the book, the thematic trigger for and source of the action. The goal of that search, the goal of moving into and through the Great Perhaps, the goal of moving through the labyrinth of feeling and insight and reaction and confusion that results from that search is ... an indication of the meaning of life and/or of death, the book's second thematic interest. The first part of the book focuses on, and is anchored by, Miles' experiences resulting from his search for the former - the meaning of life which, from his initially Rabelaisian perspective, is to celebrate, enjoy, and explore the possibilities ... for everything from friendship to food, from cigarettes to sex, from excitement to sleep. The second part of the book focuses on, and is likewise anchored by, his search for the meaning of death. In both cases, he learns about the general from the specific, the overall value emerging from particular experiences. In the case of his exploration of death, his understanding emerges from his search for the literal causes and triggers of Alaska's death, with his search for the particular meaning of that particular incident illuminating the answers to his questions about both death AND LIFE. His ultimate conclusion about both? That it's not always possible, if ever, to know what meaning actually is. The point of the experience, it seems, is to HAVE the experience fully, let it be what it is, understand it if possible, but move on into the Great Perhaps either way ... arguably, a profoundly Rabelaisian philosophy.



## Loyalty

Interestingly, at the same time as the book thematically and narratively advocates acting, feeling and believing from a place of almost absolute freedom and curiosity, it just as clearly seems to be activating a clear, unarguable boundary to that freedom - the essential importance of loyalty, to one's friends, values, and intentions. That boundary manifests throughout the narrative in the behavior and attitudes of the entire student body of Miles' school, and in particular the relationships he builds with his friends. Loyalty is the grounding force of virtually all their actions - loyalty to one another, to their individual and group identities, and to their feelings for one another. This is true not only in terms of how the members of Miles' small circle are consistently determined to protect each other from potential punishment, nor is it only true of the larger group (i.e. the non-Weekend Warriors) to which they belong. The most significant loyalty portrayed in the narrative is Miles' loyalty to his feelings about Alaska, not to mention his dreams for their relationship. All other loyalties, for him, pale beside that one particular loyalty which, as Chip angrily points out, eventually begins to verge on delusion. Miles' loyalty to what he believes was/is her attraction to/desire for him colors and defines his every action, particularly in the latter half of the narrative in which he and Chip are investigating her death. The intensity and blindness of his belief, however, seems to suggest that loyalty might not be the positive value that Chip and the other students seem to believe it is. On the other hand, the group's loyalty to Alaska and her spirit manifests in a great prank, a clearly Rabelaisian puncturing of the school's pretention. All in all, it seems, loyalty is, in the thematic perspective of this narrative, a double edged sword ...



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written, for the most part, from the first person past tense point of view of narrator and protagonist Miles Halter. The events of the story are recounted from his intellectual, philosophical and experiential perspective, drawing the reader into his subjective experiences of school, love, and death. The primary value of this perspective is that engages the reader thoroughly with Miles' story, and arguably quite personally, since virtually all of his experiences, it could be argued, have been experienced by the reader in one way or another. There are a couple of exceptions to this overall point of view, not in terms of whose point of view the narration comes from but in how it's expressed. To be specific, there are a couple of occasions in which Miles' narration shifts into present tense, these occasions occurring (interestingly enough) in the second half of the novel, when Miles is exploring/documenting his reactions to Alaska's death. The sense here is of increased immediacy, of drawing the reader even more completely into Miles' subjective experiences. As a result of this shift, the reader feels Miles' gut wrenching grief and, later, his gut-freeing escape from that grief even more powerfully, a situation that would, in all likelihood, awaken the reader even more thoroughly to his/her own experiences of such feeling.

In terms of thematic point of view, and as discussed in "Themes" above, there is the clear sense that the work is written from what might be described as a Rabelaisian perspective (see "Themes - The Search for 'The Great Perhaps'"). This perspective, in short, encourages the embracing of any/all experiences in life, whether celebratory (as in the first half of the novel) or painful (as in the second half).

## Setting

The novel is set in contemporary Alabama (see "Objects/Places") in the present day. The primary value of this setting can be found in the interplay between the climate of the area and the emotions / state of mind of the characters. While there are no obvious and/or heavy-handed parallels (i.e. thunderstorms when bad things are about to happen) there are certain understated parallels that add layers of meaning to the work. First, there is the sense of Alabama's oppressive heat when Miles first arrives, which can be seen to be evocative of his potentially oppressive sense of personal loneliness and of the impending oppression he and his friends (i.e. the non-Weekend Warriors - see "Characters") experience at the hands of the wealthier part time students. Then there is a general sense of the weather's unpredictability (i.e. the sudden, lingering rainstorm that continues throughout much of "Before, Part 5"), which puts pressure on the characters in much the same way as attacks by the Weekend Warriors (which, perhaps unsurprisingly, takes place during the storm) puts pressure on Miles and his friends to take vengeful action. Finally, there is the opening of the climate into spring in the novel's final chapters, a climatic and therefore metaphoric parallel to the opening





into freedom from grief and guilt that the characters experience in the wake of the Alaska memorial prank ("After, Part 5"). Again, the point must be made that these setting/context-based layers of meaning are woven into the narrative with subtlety and care, hinting at their sub-textual value rather than hitting the reader over the head with MEANING and SYMBOLISM.

## Language and Meaning

### Language and Meaning

For the most part, the language used in the narrative is both straightforward and appropriate. As referred to in "Setting", there are very few overt and/or heavy-handed metaphors and/or symbols, the author apparently preferring evocation of layered meaning rather than outright statements of relationship between image and character experience. Worthy of particular note is the dialogue, with the characters speaking in ways that are both vividly individualized and evocative of the often salty, often crude, often outright vulgar ways that contemporary young people tend to speak. This is not a book that conservative parents would embrace, but instead seems to be anchored in / defined by a Rabelaisian energy (see "Themes - The Search for the Great Perhaps") which features and /or triggers an outspokenness, a disregard of boundaries put in place by propriety, a favoring of raw impulse and lack of inhibition over tact and politeness. The irony is that in thematically and narratively portraying a world and/or a philosophy with moral, intellectual and verbal boundaries that are (flexible? failing? vanishing?), the author is making choices that, in some ways, are THEMSELVES defined by boundaries (i.e. "I will write this way, rather than that way.") Might this mean that on some level and through his choices on language, the author is (perhaps subconsciously) making a thematically relevant statement that a life completely without boundaries, a life similar to that lived, and left, by Alaska (who is arguably a pure Rabelaisian with virtually no boundaries at all) is ultimately unsustainable? Hmm ...

## Structure

For the most part, the narrative unfolds in an essentially forward moving narrative structure, cause leading to effect, action leading to reaction, all events contributing to a plot and story that, in turn, defines the central character's journey of transformation. There is, however, a particularly intriguing element of how this structure is laid out - the chapter headings. As previously discussed (see "Before, Part 2 - Analysis"), the headings of each section in the first part of the novel, in their day by day countdown to some unnamed event, generate a powerful sense of narrative suspense and reader intrigue through their inclusion of the word "before" without saying exactly before WHAT. In other words the reader, like Miles, is drawn further and further towards what is clearly an inevitable encounter with an important, possibly traumatic, event, situation or circumstance. Aside from generating reader interest, however, there is arguably thematic significance to this narrative/structural technique. There is the very clear sense that this "countdown" is, in a way, an evocation of a literary labyrinth, taking the reader



and the characters inevitably and inescapably into a mysterious, confusing situation that, once the center is reached (i.e. the main event that follows these "before" events), the characters and reader will be then have to find their way out of (i.e. in the "after" section) ... into and out of, as it were, a labyrinth of feeling from which they emerge with greater insight into themselves, into the world, and into the nature of life itself. For further consideration of the concept of labyrinths, see "Topics for Discussion - Research and discuss mythologies ..."



## Quotes

"The week before I left my family and Florida and the rest of my minor life to go to boarding school in Alabama, my mother insisted on throwing me a going away party. To say that I had low expectations would be to underestimate the matter dramatically."  
p. 3

"The only thing worse than having a party that no one attends is having a party attended only by two vastly, deeply uninteresting people."  
p. 4

" 'Francois Rabelais. He was this poet. And his last words were "I go to seek a Great Perhaps." That's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps.'"  
p. 5 - Miles

"I'd never been born again with the baptism and weeping and all that, but it couldn't feel much better than being born again as a guy with no known past."  
p. 8

"So Chip became the Colonel - the military style planner of their pranks, and Alaska was ever Alaska, the larger than life creative force behind them."  
p. 20

"What is the nature of being a person? What is the best way to go about being a person? How did we come to be, and what will become of us when we are no longer? In short: what are the rules of the game, and how might best we play it?"  
p. 32 - Dr. Hyde

"I wanted to be one of those people who have streaks to maintain, who scorch the ground with their intensity. But for now, at least I knew such people, and they needed me, just like comets need tails."  
p. 49

"It's from an Aleut word, Aleyska. It means "that which the sea breaks against", and I love that. But at the time, I just saw Alaska up there. And it was big, just like I wanted to be. And it was damn far away from Vine Station, Alabama, just like I wanted to be."  
p. 53 - Alaska.

"You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you'll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present."  
p. 54 - Alaska

"And I vaguely remember Lara smiling at me from the doorway, the glittering ambiguity of a girl's smile, which seems to promise an answer to the question but never gives it.



THE question, the one we've all been asking since girls stopped being gross, the question that is too simple to be uncomplicated: does she like me or LIKE me?"  
p. 65

"...you walk around squinting all day because you've forgotten how sunlight feels warm and rough against your skin like a kiss on the cheek from your dad, and the whole world is brighter and cleaner than before, like central Alabama has been put in the washing machine for two weeks and cleaned with extra superstrength detergent with color brightener ..."  
p. 71

"... I thought it might be a fine time to say the Three Little Words. And I steeled myself to say them as I stared up at that starriest night, convinced myself that she felt it too, that her hand was so alive and vivid against my leg was more than playful, and fuck Lara and fuck Jake because I do, Alaska Young, I do love you and what else matters but that ..."  
p. 82

"...I lacked the courage and she had a boyfriend and I was gawky and she was gorgeous and I was hopelessly boring and she was endlessly fascinating ... if people were rain, I was drizzle and she was a hurricane."  
p. 88

"This never happened to me in Florida, this oh-so-high-school angst about who likes whom more, and I hated myself for letting it happen now. You don't have to care about her, I told myself. Screw her."  
p. 99

"People, I thought, wanted security. They couldn't bear the idea of death being a big black nothing, couldn't bear the thought of their loved ones not existing, and couldn't even imagine themselves not existing. I finally decided that people believed in an afterlife because they couldn't bear not to."  
p. 100

"The five of us walking confidently in a row, I'd never felt cooler. The Great Perhaps was upon us, and we were invincible, The plan may have had faults, but we did not."  
p. 103

"Hating the cool kids takes an awful lot of energy, and I'd given up on it a long time ago. For me, the prank was just a response to a previous prank, just a golden opportunity to, as the Colonel said, wreak a little havoc. But to Alaska, it seemed to be something else, something more."  
p. 111

"Lara had always needed to talk for her parents, I thought, and so maybe she never learned how to talk for herself. And I wasn't great at talking for myself either. We had something important in common, then, a personality quirk I didn't share with Alaska or anybody else, although almost my definition Lara and I couldn't express it to each



other."  
p. 118

"There comes a time when we realize that our parents cannot save themselves or save us, that everyone who wades through time eventually gets dragged out to sea by the undertow - that, in short, we are all going."  
p. 120

"Sometimes, just because they're funny ... but a lot of times, people die how they live. And so last words tell me a lot about who people were, and why they became the sort of people biographies get written about."  
p. 128

"We left. We did not say: don't drive, you're drunk. We did not say: we aren't letting you in that car when you are upset. We did not say: we insist on going with you. We did not say: This can wait until tomorrow. Anything - everything - can wait."  
p. 132

"And then comes the puke, finally, splashing onto the trash. And here is whatever of her I had left in my mouth, here in this trash can. And then it comes again, more - and then okay, calm down, okay, seriously, she's not dead."  
p. 140

"And now she was colder by the hour, more dead with every breath I took. I thought: That is the fear: I have lost something important, and I cannot find it, and I need it. It is fear like if someone lost his glasses and went to the glasses store and they told him that the world had run out of glasses and he would just have to do without."  
p. 144

"...and for a few moments, it was just the three of us ... three bodies and two people - the three who knew what had happened and too many layers between all of us, too much keeping us from one another."  
p. 152

"...everybody who has ever lost their way in life has felt the nagging insistence of that question. At some point we all look up and realize we are lost in a maze, and I don't want us to forget Alaska, and I don't want to forget that even when the material we study seems boring, we're trying to understand how people have answered that question and the questions each of you posed in your papers ..."  
p. 158 - Dr. Hyde.

"It was not enough to be the last guy she kissed. I wanted to be the last one she loved. And I knew I wasn't. I knew it, and I hated her for it. I hated her for not caring about me. I hated her for leaving that night, and I hated myself, too, not only because I let her go but because if I had been enough for her, she wouldn't have even wanted to leave."  
p. 171



"I knew that I would know more dead people. The bodies pile up. Could there be a space in my memory for each of them, or would I forget a little of Alaska every day for the rest of my life?"

p. 172

"... she had embodied the Great Perhaps - she had proved to me that it was worth it to leave behind my minor life for grander maybes, and now she was gone and with her my faith in perhaps."

p. 172 - 2

"Last words are always harder to remember when no one knows that someone's about to die."

p. 187

"I loved her, and after she died I couldn't think about anything else. It felt, like, dishonest. Like cheating."

p. 192 - Miles.

"I was not religious, but I liked rituals. I liked the idea of connecting an action with remembering. In China ... there are days reserved for grave cleaning, where you make gifts to the dead. And I imagined that Alaska would want a smoke, and so it seemed to me that [Chip] had begun an excellent ritual."

p. 193

"I wasn't worried about getting expelled. I wasn't even worried about getting [Chip] expelled, although maybe I should have been. I was worried that it wouldn't work because Alaska hadn't planned it. Maybe no prank worthy of her could be pulled off without her."

p. 207

"She didn't leave me enough to discover her, but she left me enough to rediscover the Great Perhaps."

p. 212

"There were so many of us who would have to live with things done and things left undone that day. Things that did not go right, things that seemed okay at the time because we could not see the future. If only we could see the endless string of consequences that result from our smallest actions. But we can't know better until knowing better is useless."

p. 218



## Topics for Discussion

What are your experiences of loyalty, its positive side (i.e. friendship, support) and its negative side (i.e. blind, unquestioning loyalty)? Discuss the differences between the two. What are the consequences when loyalty crosses into blind loyalty? What are the dangers of blind loyalty? What are the positive values of loyalty in general?

Discuss your beliefs about the meaning of life and / or death. What is the purpose of life? What happens after death? How does one best navigate the former? How does one best prepare for the latter, or can one?

What is your position on the concept of "The Great Perhaps", and on the value of searching and/or exploring life from a basis of that concept? What, in your view, is the value of possibility, sensation and celebration of life? Are you a Rabelaisian (one who believes in embracing life in all its possibilities, for both pleasure and suffering) or are you a Puritan (one who believes life is best lived within a clear, defined, disciplined set of behavioural boundaries)? Explain why you feel the way you do in this area.

In what ways have you had an experience of feeling trapped in a labyrinth (i.e. in a maze of feeling, experience, situation or choice that you feel unable to escape)? How did being trapped in that way feel? How did it make you act? What choices/actions did you take to escape the labyrinth?

Research and discuss the mythologies and contemporary spiritual interpretations of labyrinths. What are the metaphorical / symbolic / archetypal experiences associated with labyrinths? What basic human experiences do they evoke and/or trigger? How does the action of the narrative and the story of what happens to the central characters reflect these archetypal experiences?

Search out a labyrinth in your own community (some large churches have them, so do some meditation / yoga studios), and travel through it with your research on labyrinths in mind. Or, if one is not available, create your own (i.e. in snow, through marking a path in a gymnasium or open space, etc.) Afterwards describe and / or discuss your experience of walking through the labyrinth.

Do you think Alaska's death was deliberate or accidental? Did she kill herself or was she drunk and driving carelessly? Explain your answer, given what you know from the narrative about her character and the circumstances of her death.

Research and discuss the basic tenets and/or values of the three spiritual systems discussed by Dr. Hyde in his World Religions class - Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. When your research is complete, answer for yourself the question posed by Dr. Hyde's final exam (see "After, Part 6") - addressing Alaska's question of how to emerge from the labyrinth of suffering through consideration and application of the same three spiritual systems.



Using your research and discussion on the three main spiritual systems referred to in the novel, answer Dr. Hyde's first exam question for yourself - "What is the most important question human beings must answer? Choose your question wisely, and then examine how Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity attempt to answer it".

What are the symbolic and/or metaphoric values in the name 'Miles Halter'? Consider both the first name and the last name.