

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl Study Guide

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl by Jesse Andrews

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Plot Summary

Greg Gaines' main goal in life is to avoid making any friends at high school. By avoiding making any friends, Greg reasons, he can avoid being criticized, judged, or disliked. Greg is so insecure that it is stopping him from being truly alive: he avoids life rather than participating in it. Greg's only friend is Earl Jackson, another senior at his high school. The boys share a love of cinema and together they write and direct their own short films inspired by their favorite movies. Although they take pleasure in making the films together they refuse to ever show the finished product to anyone else. Only two copies of each Gaines/Jackson DVD exist – one for Greg and one for Earl – and no one else has ever seen any of their films.

Greg's life started to change when his mom insisted that he get back in touch with a girl called Rachel who he attended Hebrew school with in the sixth grade. Rachel had been diagnosed with leukemia and both Greg's mom and Rachel's mom thought it would cheer Rachel up to spend some time with Greg. Greg was initially reluctant to contact Rachel because the plan went against everything he was trying to achieve: he wanted to avoid making friends, not reconnect with people from his past. But gradually, Greg came to realize how much he enjoyed spending time with Rachel and their friendship blossomed. Eventually, Greg introduced Rachel to Earl - his only other friend - and after a bumpy start they became friends too. When Rachel expressed an interest in the Gaines/Jackson films Earl offered to show her the DVDs despite protests from Greg. Rachel loved the DVDs and watched them over and over again when she was in hospital having chemotherapy. Another student from their high school, Madison Hartner, found out how much Rachel enjoyed the Gaines/Jackson films and suggested to Greg that they should make a film especially for Rachel.

Greg agreed to the plan but quickly regretted it when he and Earl struggled to come up with ideas about what the film should be. The film began to take over Greg's life and he started to fall behind at school, causing his teachers to worry that he would ruin his chances of getting into a good college. What was worse, from Greg's perspective, was that everyone at school knew that he and Earl were making a film for Rachel. Suddenly everyone knew who he was and Greg was no longer able to live the kind of anonymous existence that he craved.

After multiple failed attempts Greg and Earl finally finished "Rachel the Film". Unbeknownst to them, Rachel's mom had found a copy of the film and had shown it to Greg's mom. The two women were so touched by what Greg and Earl had done that they decided everyone should get the chance to see the film. Without telling the boys, the Principal arranged for a special screening of "Rachel the Film" for the entire school. This was a nightmare for Greg, who never wanted to share any of their films with anyone. Most of the students thought that Greg and Earl's film was weird, but Rachel told them that she enjoyed it. She told Greg and Earl that she wanted both of them to apply to go to Film School. Shortly after the screening of their film for her, Rachel died.



In the Epilogue, Greg reveals that he is writing the book in order to explain to the admissions board that his grief over Rachel's death is the reason that he failed so many classes in his first year of college. Through the process of writing the book, Greg realizes that he doesn't want to go back to college. He wants to apply to Film School, just like Rachel suggested he should. Writing about what happened to him has provided a kind of therapy, and by the end of the Epilogue Greg is no longer afraid to go out into the world and be the person he really is. Although Greg protests that he didn't learn any important life lessons as a result of the events in the novel, in fact, Rachel's death has taught him the value of being alive.



Chapters 1 – 8

Summary

In the opening line of Chapter 1, in the narration, Greg Gaines introduces the central premise of the story he is about to recount: high school sucks. Greg uses Chapter 1 to introduce the reader to Benson High School in inner-city Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the various groups of students who go there. He explains that no single clique has managed to assert control over his high school and suggests that this is because the school borders one very affluent neighborhood and one poorer neighborhood, meaning there is a big mixture of students from different backgrounds. Greg explains his plan for coping with how much high school sucks: he will avoid becoming a part of any group or making any friends and will therefore be able to avoid being shunned or bullied by any of the groups.

In Chapter 2, Greg described what happened to him on the first day of his senior year. When he got to school, he realized that things had changed since last year and now – because he was a senior – it was even easier to avoid being noticed by other students. Greg had superficial and short conversations with a number of other students which he quickly ended so that he wouldn't give anyone the impression that he was friends with the people he spoke to. Greg described this as “a perfect day.”

In Chapter 3, Greg explained all of the failed interactions he had had with girls during his life and offered explanations about what had gone wrong in each scenario. In the first instance Greg explained that his main problem with girls was that he wasn't very good looking. His tactics for approaching girls he had a crush on were all unsuccessful and included: getting a friend to tell a girl he didn't have a crush on her; relentlessly insulting a girl he had a crush on; pretending to have a crush on someone else to make the girl he really had a crush on jealous; complimenting a girl on her breasts; and trying to be a “gentleman”.

In Chapter 4, Greg listed what happened to all of the girls he wrote about in the previous chapter.

In Chapter 5, Greg continued the story of his first day of senior year. After having a great day at school, he went home where his mom informed him that Rachel Kushner, the girl he had pretended to have a crush on to make another girl jealous, had been diagnosed with leukemia. Greg's mom told him that it was important for him to be a good friend to Rachel during such a difficult time and told him that he was the only person from their high school who knew about the diagnosis. Greg's mom told him that she had spoken to Rachel's mom Denise and that the two of them wanted Greg to get in touch with Rachel so that he could cheer her up by making her laugh.

In Chapter 6, Greg imagined all of the terrible ways he could attempt to start a conversation with Rachel. He called her house and spoke to Denise, Rachel's mom,



who gave Greg Rachel's cellphone number. Greg called Rachel and asked her if she wanted to hang out. Rachel said no. Greg explained that this incident was just one of multiple occasions in which his mother insisted on interfering with his social life.

In Chapter 7, Greg introduced the members of his family in the form of a list. His dad, Victor, is a college professor and a hippy who does lots of weird things, like buying disgusting food and talking to the cat. His mom Marla, used to be a hippy too but isn't anymore. She is strong-willed and opinionated. His sister Gretchen is fourteen and Greg states that it's impossible to have a friendly relationship with a girl of this age. His sister Grace is six and also talks to the cat, like their dad.

In Chapter 8, Greg tried calling Rachel again and once again she said she didn't want to hang out with him. He tried to explain this to his mom, but she refused to listen and spoke constantly so that Greg couldn't get a word in. Greg called Rachel again and she asked him why he suddenly wanted to hang out with her when he ignored her at school. Greg didn't want to explain that he ignores everyone at school because he wants to avoid being part of a group so instead he lied and told her that she had broken his heart years earlier when they were at Hebrew school together. Rachel invited Greg to come over and hangout.

Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces Greg Gaines as a character and uses Greg's narration to achieve a number of goals. The narration in this chapter gives the reader insight into Greg's personality, introduces the style of the book, and hints at how the plot will develop. The tone of the narration is established in the very first line, when Greg states: "So in order to understand everything that happened, you have to start from the premise that high school sucks." The use of "so" – a very casual and informal method of starting a sentence – implies that this story is being addressed to a specific person or group of people, rather than to a general readership, although it will not be revealed until the Epilogue exactly who Greg is addressing in his narration. The reader is also informed in this line that the story will be about a specific event – "what happened" – and won't simply be a book about why high school sucks in general. By detailing all of the tactics he uses to avoid committing to a particular group of friends, Greg gives the impression that he is a lonely and isolated person who is not fully participating in the life of his high school. However, the humor in the narration contrasts with this negative characterization by showing that Greg is witty, entertaining, and inventive. The chapter also introduces the unusual style of the writing when Greg breaks his narration to give the reader information in the form of a list of reasons that avoiding becoming part of a group is difficult.

Chapter 2 introduces another one of Greg's unusual writing techniques. Instead of writing prose, Greg relayed the interactions he had with other students in screenplay format. This technique gives the novel a quirky and original tone and provides opportunities for humor, and makes these sections very quick and easy to read. The technique also hints at Greg's interest in scripts and filmmaking, which is a central



theme in the novel, although it has not yet been introduced explicitly at this point in the book. The series of interactions are very funny but are also tinged with sadness when the reader is informed that Greg's idea of a perfect day is to avoid spending too much time with any other students. Although Greg's tone in this chapter was lighthearted and entertaining, the actual events he described appeared isolating and depressing. This is the first sign in the novel that there is a discrepancy between the way Greg described events and what they were actually like.

Greg's lack of self-esteem is apparent throughout the novel, most often in his expressed desire to punch himself in the face after he has said something stupid. In Chapter 3, his lack of confidence and self-esteem is explored specifically in relation to his interactions with members of the opposite sex, which are revealed to be inept and embarrassing. This chapter also introduces Rachel Kushner as a character. Rachel is introduced under the heading "Failed Girl Tactic #3: The Diversion", as a girl that Greg pretended to have a crush on several years before the narrative of the book took place. By placing her in the middle of a 5-point list and pointing out that Greg only pretended to like her, the author obscures how important her character will be in the narrative.

The author changes the order in which the girls are discussed in Chapter 4, this time placing Rachel at the very end of the list. Greg states that Rachel was diagnosed with leukemia during their senior year of high school. Because Greg has already informed the reader that the story he is telling is about his senior year, this detail – alongside the new emphasis placed on Rachel once she has been moved to the end of the list – established the fact that Rachel's illness is a central part of the story Greg is writing.

Chapter 5 starts to reveal a pattern to the writing style. During especially emotional or difficult conversations, Greg switches to screenplay format. One of the main stylistic differences between prose fiction and screenwriting is that, in the former, the author can communicate the internal thoughts and fears of the character, whereas in screenplay form the only information that can be communicated to the reader is the words that the characters are saying and the actions they take. The use of screenplay format for the chapter in which Greg is informed that Rachel is sick is symbolic of his inability to articulate how much her illness and eventual death affected him. He only wants to recount the things he said and did, not the way he feels about them. Greg's mom's request is the catalyst event in the novel. Asking him to contact Rachel again will permanently alter the course of the novel and the course of Greg's life.

Chapter 6 makes great use of the techniques of building tension and suspense, then undercutting them with humor and anticlimax. By this stage in the novel the reader has grown accustomed to Greg's worst-case-scenario thinking, so when Greg lists all of the ways his conversation with Rachel might go wrong it comes across as unnecessarily pessimistic and unlikely. Because it is now clear that Greg's relationship with Rachel is the central topic of the book, their first conversation is highly anticipated and the run up to the phone call builds suspense. The tension is diffused with humor when their conversation is precisely as awkward and unsuccessful as Greg predicted it would be.



Chapter 7 provides character biographies without any action, dialogue or scenes which move the plot further forward. This is once again a technique borrowed from filmmaking, which is Greg's main passion in life. In screenwriting it is common to write character biographies when developing a script, which can be used as a reference later in the writing process to remind the writer about each character's background and personality. When Greg described his mom he pointed out that when she decides something is the right thing to do, there is no way to change her mind. This informs the reader that, even though Greg's conversation with Rachel in the previous chapter was a disaster, there is no way Marla Gaines is going to let him give up on his mission to befriend Rachel.

Chapter 8 is an important turning point in the novel, as this is the moment when Greg and Rachel agree that they will spend time together. The most significant moment in this chapter is when Rachel says something funny and it makes Greg laugh. Up until this chapter it is Greg who has been defined as someone who makes other people laugh. This is the first sign that Greg's relationship with Rachel will be different than the relationships he has with the other characters in the novel. The final line of this chapter states that the next chapter will introduce the character of Earl, building suspense for the next section because the title makes clear that this character will be important.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Greg want to avoid becoming part of a group at school?

Discussion Question 2

What techniques does the author use to show that Greg and Rachel will become friends?

Discussion Question 3

How is Greg's mom depicted? Do you sympathize with her actions or do you agree with Greg that she is annoying?

Vocabulary

plentiful, demographic, jockeying, wretched, realigned, hierarchy, infiltrate, mediocre, chronic, sullen, invariably, embedded, phenomenal, inexplicable, acute, colossal, psychotic, vulnerability, meditations, imminent



Chapters 9 – 16

Summary

In Chapter 9, Greg called Earl to tell him that they couldn't watch movies that night because Greg was going to visit Rachel. In the narration, Greg explained that Earl is a friend of his from the poorer part of town. Greg made a list of reasons that Earl's living situation was less than ideal including the fact that neither Earl's dad nor stepdad live with them or contribute to the family's finances, that the house is very loud and smelly because Earl's older brothers are so badly behaved and never clean, and that Earl is the only one of the brothers who regularly attends school. Because of this, Earl and Greg spent most of their time together at the Gaines family house, where Earl has a good relationship with both of Greg's parents.

In Chapter 10, Greg went to visit Rachel at her house. He spoke to her mom Denise and made her laugh, before going upstairs to Rachel's bedroom. Although he initially felt awkward, Greg made Rachel laugh too and they had a fun conversation.

In Chapter 11, Greg told the story of how he became friends with Earl. Although they used to play video games together at Earl's house, after Earl's stepdad left it became an unpleasant environment and instead the boys started watching DVDs belonging to Greg's dad at the Gaines house. They discovered a film called *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and tried to share it with some other classmates, but only Greg and Earl liked it.

In Chapter 12, Greg explained his theory that the easiest way to make people like you is to let them do all the talking. But he couldn't use this tactic with Rachel and whenever they were together the reverse would happen and Greg would be the one doing all the talking. After several visits and several conversations, Greg watched *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* with Rachel. Greg's mom interrupted them and told Rachel that Greg makes his own films, severely embarrassing Greg in the process.

In Chapter 13, Greg told the story of his and Earl's first ever attempt to make a film. They tried to remake *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and it was terrible, so Earl suggested they made their own film instead of trying to copy someone else's. They made another film. It was still really bad but it was better than their first.

In Chapter 14, Greg explained that his friendship with Rachel was starting to threaten his ability to be the kid at school who didn't belong to one particular group. Greg started eating lunch with Rachel and her friends and Madison Hartner – a girl Greg has had a crush on since kindergarten – sat with them too. Greg made all of the girls laugh by pretending his lunch was alien barf.

In Chapter 15, Greg listed all of the films he and Earl made together and gave each one a star rating out of 5. In Chapter 16, Greg explained that when the boys finished



making a film they would burn two copies onto DVD and then destroy the original footage. They would never let anyone else watch their films.

Analysis

It is clear from the title of the novel that the story will revolve around three main characters. Because the narrative is told in the first-person it is immediately apparent that Greg the narrator is the “Me” of the title. In Chapter 4, when it was revealed that Rachel had been diagnosed with leukemia, the reader discovered which of the characters is “The Dying Girl” however it isn’t until Chapter 9 that Earl’s character is properly introduced into the story, although he has been mentioned in passing in earlier chapters. Earl is, in many ways, the opposite of Greg. Where Greg keeps his thoughts to himself and tries not to reveal his emotions to anyone, Earl has trouble controlling his emotions and frequently expresses himself through angry outbursts. Where Greg is from a stable and supportive middle class family, Earl has grown up in poverty in a broken home.

Much of this chapter portrays harmful stereotypes about African Americans which include: a lack of discipline and tendency towards criminality, absent father figures, violent tempers, poverty, and ungrammatical use of language. This characterization of Earl’s family could initially be uncomfortable or offensive for the reader as it appears to confirm all of the worst prejudices many people have against African American communities. Later in the novel, however, the author starts to undercut this depiction by showing the many ways that Earl does not conform to the negative stereotypes introduced in this chapter.

Chapter 10 is the first time Greg and Rachel interact in person and it sets the tone for their relationship throughout the rest of the novel. In his narration, Greg often points out how awkward, stupid, or unpleasant he has been but when he does these things with Rachel she just thinks they’re funny. A constant feature of Greg’s narration is that he downplays his emotions and the significance of events in his life. When he laughed at a disgusting message from Earl, he worried that Rachel would demand to know what the message said but she told him he didn’t need to tell her if he didn’t want to. There is a contrast here between the way Greg feels and how he articulates his feelings. His narration states that “one thing you could say about Rachel was this: She wasn’t constantly trying to fuck up your plans”. In most circumstances, this wouldn’t count as much of a compliment, but because Greg is so relentlessly negative and pessimistic this moment in which he offers faint praise of another person becomes significant, implying that he is actually very impressed with Rachel and likes her a lot.

Chapter 11 lays the groundwork for understanding Greg and Earl’s attempts at filmmaking. Although the reader has still not yet been informed about the films the boys make together there have been a handful of references building up Greg’s interest in movies and filmmaking. The reader discovers that their friendship is based on a shared love of movies, but that their tastes are a little bizarre and aren’t similar to the tastes and opinions of their classmates. This information is useful backstory in understanding why



two boys with such different backstories became friends, but is also used to foreshadow the pep rally later in the novel when the stark difference in tastes between Greg and Earl and the rest of the student body will lead to a major plot incident.

In this chapter Greg admitted in his narration that he liked spending time with Rachel, although he did this in a characteristically pessimistic and negative way by implying that Rachel was trying to manipulate him into liking her and enjoying himself. This also produces comedy as the average person thinks that spending time with people who you like isn't something that you need to try to avoid, but Greg presented it as a problem which he had been trapped into. This chapter builds tension when Greg lists the things that Rachel was accomplishing by getting him to talk so much. One of the reasons was that she would get Greg to "divulge sensitive information which would ultimately lead to my downfall." This makes the reader wonder what information Greg is hiding and how Rachel is going to use it to bring about his downfall. At this stage it is impossible to see how Greg's conversations with Rachel could be anything other than entertaining and friendly, so this line introduces an element of mystery to the narrative.

When Greg told Rachel that he didn't want anyone else to see his movies because they weren't good enough, Rachel said she understood. This was an unusual experience for Greg because he is used to his mom ignoring his preferences and interfering with what he wants to do. Although in the narration Greg insists that this wasn't a big deal, the contrast between the way Rachel treats him and the way his mom treats him proved that he appreciated the way Rachel reacted to finding out about his films. The reader knows how special *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* is to Greg and that it is something he only shares with Earl, so when he watches it with Rachel it is a sign of how much he cares about her, even though he is unwilling to admit this in his narration.

Chapter 13 is a significant moment in the novel because it introduces and properly explains the fact that Greg and Earl make their own films together. The films they make are central to the way their relationships with Rachel develop and are also key to how their lives will progress after Rachel's death.

Chapter 14 starts to show the profound effect that Rachel is having on Greg's life. Although he started hanging out with her because he was supposed to cheer her up, the opposite occurs and Rachel ushers him away from his isolated existence at school by welcoming him into her group of friends. Greg doesn't see this as a positive thing and instead regrets the fact that people at school are starting to notice him and have opinions about him, which makes him anxious. To outside appearances, Greg's life is improving: the other students think that Rachel is his girlfriend and that he is popular and well-liked amongst her group of friends. To Greg, however, this is a disaster. The contrast between Greg's attitude and conventional attitudes makes this chapter very funny. This chapter also introduces the character of Madison, who Greg has a crush on. Greg's relationships with Madison and Rachel will be contrasted throughout the rest of the novel.

Chapter 15 is especially entertaining for film fans as the "Gaines/Jackson Collected Works" are all parodies or tributes to classic cinematic masterpieces such as *Ran* made



by the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. This chapter sets up the fact that, although Greg and Earl are clearly very creative and inventive (the works cited in this chapter are only a partial list of all of the films the boys have worked on together), they don't believe that their films are very good. The highest star rating Greg gives any of their work is 3 ½ stars out of 5.

Chapter 16 established two important bits of information. Firstly, both Greg and Earl are extremely sensitive about their films. They refuse to show them to anyone else because they don't believe that they've made anything that is good enough to share with a wider audience. This will become significant later in the novel when they agree to let Rachel watch the films and when one of their films is shared with the other students at their high school without their permission.

The other important bit of information in this chapter is that there are only two copies of each film. Later, when Greg and Earl separately destroy their DVDs, the reader knows that this means the films have been lost forever.

Discussion Question 1

What methods does the author use to make Earl's dialogue different to the other characters?

Discussion Question 2

Does Greg's first meeting with Rachel live up to his expectations?

Discussion Question 3

What is it about "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" that makes Greg and Earl like it so much? Does Greg's description make you want to see the film?

Vocabulary

profane, default, perpetually, sufficient, consciousness, trudged, obnoxious, rupturing, triumph, rambunctious, tundra, psychopath, scrawniest, orchestrated, pouty, jittery, inaudible, beagles, lobotomy, momentum



Chapters 17 – 24

Summary

In Chapter 17, Greg and Earl ate their lunch in Mr. McCarthy's classroom. When he left the room, the boys ate some of his soup. Later that day they realized they had consumed cannabis and were stoned. Rachel invited Greg to come to her house and Greg took Earl with him.

In Chapter 18, Earl and Greg arrived at Rachel's house still very stoned. Rachel was upset by their strange behavior, so Greg confessed to her that they had taken drugs. Earl suggested that they should all go out for ice cream and they did.

In Chapter 19, Earl invited Rachel to come to Greg's house and watch some of the films the boys had made together. In Chapter 20, Earl, Greg and Rachel watched the Gaines/Jackson film *Batman versus Spider-Man*. Rachel enjoyed the film and laughed a lot.

In Chapter 21, Earl and Greg planned to go to visit Rachel in the hospital while she had chemotherapy. Before they could visit, Greg broke his arm and ended up as a patient in the same hospital.

In Chapter 22, Greg listed all of the people who came to visit him in the hospital when his broken arm got infected and detailed the various things they had to say to him. Madison Hartner came to visit Greg and told him she had seen Rachel watching one of his films.

In Chapter 23, Greg visited Rachel in the hospital for the first time.

In Chapter 24, Greg's parents started asking him to think about where he would like to go to college. They gave him a directory of colleges to consider and Greg gave the book to Rachel. Greg tried to make Rachel laugh by making jokes about how fat he is, but Rachel didn't think it was funny.

Analysis

Chapter 17 introduces the character of Mr. McCarthy. He is characterized as eccentric, laidback and strange. Because of this characterization, the author implies that McCarthy's behavior is caused by the fact he is constantly stoned, which seems to be backed up when the boys secretly eat some of his soup and end up incredibly high. However, it is later revealed that the marijuana the boys consumed was actually in the cookies that Earl stole from his brother.

This chapter shows readers a softer side to Earl's character. Although he is still depicted as angry and prone to temper tantrums, when they discuss Rachel's upcoming



chemotherapy it becomes apparent that Earl is more emotionally mature and thoughtful than Greg. Earl makes sure that Greg does the right thing and goes to visit Rachel.

In Chapter 18, Earl and Rachel met each other for the first time. This is an awkward and tense meeting initially. Readers are aware that these two characters are the people who mean the most to Greg and he is therefore emotionally invested in Earl and Rachel liking each other. This chapter begins to undercut the stereotypes about Earl which were first introduced in Chapter 4. Despite the fact that he comes from a much more disadvantaged background than Greg, and has clear difficulties managing his emotions, Earl is the much calmer and more mature of the pair. When Greg started babbling and making up lies to Rachel explaining how they came to be stoned, Earl took control of the situation and explained to Rachel that they were there to cheer her up in advance of her chemotherapy.

Chapter 20 is a key turning point in the novel as it marks the moment when Greg and Earl first invite someone else to share in the work they have created. Because Greg prides himself on staying detached from people, the thought of Rachel being allowed to witness something so personal makes him very anxious. He is angry with Earl for making him this vulnerable in front of Rachel. In the narration, Greg refused to accept that Rachel actually enjoyed the film, instead rationalizing to himself that she only liked it because she was their friend.

In Chapter 21 Greg's narration undercuts traditional literary techniques with comic effect. In the opening paragraph of the chapter, in italics, Greg said "Little did I know that I would soon be joining her in the same hospital." He then goes on to analyze this sentence, asking "what the hell is this 'little did I know business'?" Usually, a line like this would be used to foreshadow an ominous event later in the novel's narrative, but Greg's analysis of his own literary style undercuts the suspense and turns it into a moment of humor. In this chapter Earl's chaotic home life is foregrounded, but any stereotypes connected to this kind of background are once again undercut when Earl is shown to be the most responsible of the pair: he has already called the hospital to find out what time the boys can visit Rachel.

In Chapter 22, the author lists all of the things each visitor says to Greg without including Greg's response, to great comic effect. When writing what Earl said, the author doesn't capitalize any letters or use any full sentences, in contrast to the way Greg's family's dialogue is written. This emphasizes Earl's comparative lack of education but also contrasts with the content of what he says. Earl has visited all of Greg's teachers to tell them what has happened and informs Greg of what his homework assignments are. Earl is Greg's only visitor who has done anything supportive or helpful for Greg's sake. When Madison discovered that Greg and Earl make films together, it began a sequence of events which eventually led to everyone in their high school knowing about their films.

In Chapter 23, Rachel greeted Greg with a line from one of their films, revealing how much she enjoyed them and how funny she thought they were. Greg was uncomfortable



visiting her in the cancer ward and tried to cover up his discomfort by making a lot of jokes.

The question of where to apply to college is used in the novel as a way of highlighting the differences between Greg and Rachel's future. Whereas Greg's only problem is that he has to decide what he wants to do, Rachel doesn't have this luxury. She can't make any plans for the future because she doesn't know whether she will survive the cancer long enough to even have a future. Although the reader has sympathized with Greg's lack of self-esteem in the novel so far, once Rachel becomes more and more sick it becomes increasingly difficult to sympathize with Greg's self-loathing. When Greg's character is contrasted with someone who has real problems and who is truly suffering it becomes more and more apparent that Greg's own troubles are all in his head and, furthermore, that they are all self-inflicted.

Discussion Question 1

How is Mr. McCarthy depicted? Why does Greg like him more than his other teachers?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Greg want Earl to show Rachel the Gaines/Jackson DVDs?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Greg uncomfortable when he visits Rachel in hospital?

Vocabulary

immune, tyrannical, conventional, oracle, morose, remedial, preoccupied, tactical, hummus, confirmation, vast, sarcastic, compensate, endure, vanquished, malfunctions, inconsistencies, eruptions, bellowing, hermit



Chapters 25 – 32

Summary

In Chapter 25, Greg and Rachel watched some more Gaines/Jackson films together and Greg began to accept that Rachel genuinely enjoyed them. Rachel told Greg she thought she was dying.

In Chapter 26, Mr. McCarthy spoke with Greg and warned him that his grades were falling and he was jeopardizing his chances of getting into college.

In Chapter 27 Madison asked Greg if he would make a film especially for Rachel and Greg said yes.

In Chapter 28, Earl and Greg brainstormed ideas about how to make a film for Rachel.

Chapter 29 explains “The Hallmark Version” of their film for Rachel, in which the boys filmed teachers and other students reading messages of support and encouragement for Rachel.

In Chapter 30, Greg and Earl made “The Ken Burns Version” of their film for Rachel, which involved trying to make a documentary from old family videos and interviews with her mom and grandparents. Rachel was still in the hospital and was becoming increasingly sick.

In Chapter 31, Earl and Greg made “The Sock Puppet Version” of their film for Rachel, in which the boys used sock puppets to dramatize Rachel fighting cancer. They were not pleased with the results.

In Chapter 32, they made “The Wallace and Gromit Version” which involved stop motion animation of Lego versions of characters from Star Wars. Meanwhile, Denise and Rachel decided to stop the chemotherapy and Rachel came home from the hospital.

Analysis

Greg’s relationship with his films is symbolic of his relationship with other people in general. He refuses to share anything personal about himself with the world at large because he assumes this would lead to him being bullied or shunned. When Earl allows Rachel to watch the films, Greg assumes that she can’t possibly like them (meaning he believes no one could possibly like him) but in chapter 25 he accepts that she does really like the films (meaning she does really like him). Although in his narration Greg insists that this isn’t a love story and that he and Rachel didn’t fall in love, the way he describes his changing attitude to allowing Rachel to watch the films proves that they did, even if he is unwilling to articulate his feelings directly.



The gap between the way Greg depicts his life in the narration and what the reader can infer from the reactions of the other characters grows wider in this chapter. It is evident that Mr. McCarthy has noticed how much Greg is struggling to cope with Rachel's illness and his despair about her situation is starting to threaten Greg's future. Mr. McCarthy was so concerned that he arranged to personally tutor Greg so that his grades would improve. Through Mr. McCarthy's actions, the reader understands how difficult Greg is finding it and how much he cares about Rachel. But in the narration, Greg continued to insist that he didn't really care and that it wasn't that much of a big deal. His inability to communicate on an emotional level is highlighted at the end of the chapter when Greg has an immature and puerile conversation with Earl, rather than talking to his best friend about how upset he is.

Chapter 27 shows the contrast between the relationship Greg has with Rachel and the relationship he has with Madison. Although Greg insists in the narration that he doesn't really like Rachel and that he has a huge crush on Madison, it is evident in the dialogue between the characters that he is much happier and more comfortable with Rachel than he is with Madison. When Greg is with Rachel he goes on "riffs" to make her laugh and can talk endlessly, whereas when he is with Madison he clams up and doesn't know what to say. Further to this, Madison doesn't understand Greg's filmmaking the way Rachel does. She asks Greg to make a film without understanding what this would involve or how Greg would go about doing it. In contrast, whenever Greg discusses filmmaking with Rachel the dialogue and narrative always emphasize that Rachel understands Greg's perspective and doesn't need him to explain anything to her.

"The Hallmark Version" of Rachel's film marks an important turning point in the novel, as this is the moment when it becomes widely known at Greg's school that he makes films. As someone who has studiously attempted to stay off everyone else's radar, this development is deeply uncomfortable for Greg. Suddenly, other students know something about him and are forming opinions about him. Greg finds it painful to think that people might be thinking negative or critical things about him, referring to his newfound fame at school as "a nightmarish barrage of attention."

Chapter 30 is the first time the reader gets any real insight into Rachel's background and life. Although a lot of detail is given about what happened to her after she was diagnosed with cancer, it is not until this very late stage in the novel that the reader starts to learn more about who Rachel really is and what her life is like. This becomes important later in the novel when Greg retrospectively realizes how they should have gone about making the film for Rachel, which revolves around his realization that he didn't know enough about her life.

Although Greg continued to insist in the narration that all of their attempts to make a film for Rachel were awful, it is clear that their ideas are actually becoming better and better. The biggest problem with "The Hallmark Version" of the film was that anyone could have made it. Rachel loved Gaines/Jackson films and the boys needed to come up with a way of making the film which reflected their personalities and matched the tone and humor of the earlier films. Although the sock puppet and Lego versions of the film sound absurd and infantile when Greg describes them in the narration, they are presented as



being very similar to some of their earlier work like Batman versus Spiderman. Despite the fact that Greg refuses to admit it, in these chapters they start making a film that Rachel is actually likely to enjoy.

Discussion Question 1

Why does thinking about applying to college make Greg anxious?

Discussion Question 2

How does Greg feel about watching the Gaines/Jackson DVDs with Rachel?

Discussion Question 3

What role does Madison Hartner play in the novel? In what ways is Greg's relationship with Madison different to his relationship with Rachel?

Vocabulary

marrow, dismissive, outburst, infuriating, blathering, ecosystem, nonnative, organisms, algae, waylay, nostalgic, melancholy, proprietary, complexity, assassinate, cannibal, vividly, rummaging, cultivating, humanizing



Chapters 33 – 40

Summary

In Chapter 33, Greg went to visit Rachel at home for the first time since she decided to stop chemotherapy. Rachel told Greg that she knew he and Earl had been making a film for her and she was excited to see it. In Chapter 34, Greg went to Earl's house to yell at him because he was so angry that Earl had told Rachel about the film they were making for her. But instead of Greg yelling at Earl, Earl ended up yelling at Greg and punching him in the stomach.

In Chapter 35, Greg and Earl attempted to finish their film for Rachel by speaking directly into the camera and telling Rachel how they feel about her.

In Chapter 36, Greg talked to Rachel about the film they made for her and she told him she liked it. Greg tried to convince her that it wasn't very good. Rachel told Greg that she had been looking through the college directory he gave her and that she wanted Greg and Earl to both apply to film school.

In Chapter 37, Greg related that making the film for Rachel caused him to fall behind at school which caused Mr. McCarthy to stage an intervention. Mr. McCarthy started to keep Greg behind every day at school to try to help him catch up with all the work he had missed. One day during lunch break, Mr. McCarthy insisted that Greg and Earl both had to attend a pep rally or he would get in trouble. At the pep rally, the principal showed "Rachel the Film" to everyone at school. Greg and Earl were severely embarrassed.

In Chapter 38, Greg described the aftermath of the screening. The other students didn't like the film because they thought it was weird and they also mistakenly believed that it was Greg and Earl's idea to make everyone watch it. Greg and Earl stopped speaking to each other and then Greg stopped going to school at all. After staying home for a few days, Greg freaked out and destroyed all of his copies of the Gaines/Jackson films. At the end of the chapter Rachel returned to hospital.

In Chapter 39, Greg went to the hospital to visit Rachel one last time before she died. Rachel didn't wake up while he was there so he didn't get the chance to speak to her. Greg sat in the hallway with his mom and they both cried. When they left the hospital, Greg knew that he wouldn't ever see Rachel again.

In Chapter 40, Earl and Greg went out to eat together in a Thai restaurant. Earl revealed to Greg that he had also destroyed his copies of the Gaines/Jackson DVDs. Earl criticized Greg for falling behind at school. Greg suggested to Earl that they should both apply to film school, but Earl said he wouldn't do it.

In the Epilogue, the narration reveals Greg's purpose in writing the book. He wrote it retrospectively after failing his first year of college as a way of explaining the



extenuating circumstances which caused him to fail. As he writes the Epilogue, Greg realizes that he doesn't want to carry on at college. He wants to apply to film school. He reveals that Madison Hartner started dating a geeky student from their high school and that Mr. McCarthy doesn't really lace his soup with marijuana. Greg writes that although he and Earl haven't made any more films since "Rachel the Film" he has a secret hope that one day he will open his own production company and be able to hire Earl.

Analysis

Once Rachel was back at home Greg felt more able to relax and be himself around her again. Whereas when she was in the hospital Greg felt compelled to make her laugh and put on a show, once they were back at her house he was able to be himself and just talk to her about his life.

Greg's fight with Earl is one of the most climactic scenes in the novel. Because the novel is told in the first-person, the reader is only given rare glimpses into how other characters view events. In Chapter 34, Earl revealed his perspective on Greg's self-esteem issues in an irate but perceptive tirade. Earl became the voice of the reader in this chapter by telling Greg about all of the character flaws that have become increasingly apparent throughout the novel. Earl criticized Greg for caring so much about what other people think of him, for treating Rachel like she is a burden rather than someone he cares about, and for getting upset over something small and unimportant like Earl showing their films to Rachel when Rachel is facing much more serious and important difficulties. The effect is a cathartic antidote to Greg's endlessly self-pitying narration.

Chapter 35 contrasts the way Earl and Greg express their emotions and demonstrates that, despite outward appearances, Earl is considerably more emotionally mature than Greg. Earl's speech to Rachel was heartfelt, poignant and honest. He told her that he was grateful that she had become a part of his life and that he was really impressed and moved by the way she was handling her illness. Earl said everything that Greg should say, but Greg failed to articulate his feelings. Instead, he told Rachel that he believed she was strong enough to get better, which the reader knows through the narration is a lie. The contrast between the way Earl and Greg behave in this chapter creates a sense of frustration. Earl's cathartic outburst in the previous chapter forced Greg to confront his character flaws, but in the following chapter he continued to behave in the same self-obsessed insecure way at a time when he should have been offering his support to Rachel. The sense of frustration is summed up in a line in the narration when Greg asked: "So what was I supposed to say? The truth?" The truth is precisely what Earl managed to say and Greg's continued refusal to honestly express his feelings for Rachel demonstrated that he did not learn anything from Earl's criticisms in the previous chapter. Greg's inability to admit how much he cares about Rachel is crystalized at the end of Chapter 35 when Greg started to cry while telling his mom about the film and tried to pretend he wasn't upset about losing his friend.



Chapter 36 is another example of Greg's narration inaccurately representing events for the reader. The chapter begins with a review of the Gaines/Jackson film "Rachel the Film", which Greg gives a paltry one star rating, calling it "the worst film ever made". However, the description makes the film sound similar to their absurd and comic earlier films, all of which Rachel loved. When Rachel told Greg that she liked the film it was made clear that she was being honest because she admitted to Greg that although she enjoyed it, it wasn't her favorite. Although Greg insisted that the film was a disaster, this chapter revealed that it was actually a huge success. Rachel liked it and was grateful the boys made it for her, which meant that they had achieved their goal. Further to this, their biggest fan began encouraging them to take filmmaking more seriously by going to film school.

Throughout the novel, Greg refers in the narration to a big event which would eventually take place in the narrative and ruin his life. That big event is the screening of their film at the pep rally. The pep rally screening functions to dismantle everything that Greg claimed to value in the opening chapter of the novel: namely his anonymity and his ability to make it through high school without anyone knowing him or knowing anything about him. At this stage in the novel, Greg's old way of life has been completely destroyed and he is correspondingly distraught. However the reader gets the sense that Greg's negativity and pessimism, as well as his inability to accept compliments, is once again clouding his judgement. He sought out faces in the crowd at the pep rally who weren't enjoying the film and dwelled on negative reactions whilst dismissing any positive reactions (from his teachers, from the stoners, and from Madison) as being dishonest or misinformed. In this way, Greg projects his own sense of self-loathing onto others. He thinks so little of himself that he is judgmental and condescending towards anyone who is impressed by him or thinks of him as talented. The destruction of the DVDs is an important moment. Because Rachel is their biggest fan, the films have become symbolic of her illness. Greg takes his grief about Rachel's impending death out on the discs.

In Chapter 39, Greg confronted the emotions he had been bottling up throughout the novel. He realized that "Rachel the Film" hadn't really been about Rachel at all and had in fact been all about Greg and Earl. When Greg says this in his narration it serves as a criticism of both "Rachel the Film" and "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl". In both the novel and the movie-within-the-novel the girl is largely passive and the narrative instead focuses on the two boys, how they perceive the events in their lives, and how these events affected them. Greg was distraught about the fact that Rachel "had a whole unique way of thinking about the world that was never going to be articulated to anyone". This passage shows Greg becoming aware of his own self-absorption and realizing how his incessant insecurity prevented him from really getting to know Rachel when she was alive. Instead of taking the opportunity to form a meaningful connection with her, Greg spent the final weeks of Rachel's life endlessly obsessing about what other people thought of him, when he could have been deepening his relationship with one of the only people in the world who actually knew him.

Chapter 40 once again employs the technique of using Earl to give the reader a different perspective on what has happened to Greg. It is clear to the reader that



Rachel's death has had a profound effect on Greg and that he has struggled to cope with the emotions her illness has caused him. In this chapter, Earl's dialogue reveals how he came to be so much more emotionally mature than Greg. Because Greg, unlike Earl, is from a financially and emotionally stable background, Rachel's death is the first bad thing that has ever happened to him. But Earl has been struggling with difficult situations and difficult emotions his entire life and is therefore much better at showing resilience in the face of adversity. Through Earl's example, the reader is given hope that Greg will be able to cope better with adversity in the future as a result of going through the difficult experiences depicted in the novel.

When Earl reveals that he destroyed his DVDs that means that all copies of the Gaines/Jackson films have been destroyed and, as explained in Chapter 16, there is no way to recover the footage. The films are gone forever and is has their only fan.

Although the Epilogue opens by revealing that Greg has been writing to the college admissions tutors throughout the novel, it quickly becomes apparent that he has no intention of submitting the book for their consideration. He writes: "writing this page right now, I just realized that I should un-retire as a filmmaker" and makes reference to the fact that he doesn't expect anyone to ever read what he has just written. The book has functioned as a form of therapy for Greg, allowing him to process what happened to Rachel and how it made him feel. His negativity still remains: every time he imagines something good happening he immediately claims that it probably won't happen, but there is a noticeable shift towards optimism in this final section. Greg realizes that the reason he didn't get the chance to date Madison isn't that he was weird and unattractive but because he never made any effort to date her. He also throws in a random insult of another student from school before declaring: "Suck it, Will Carruthers. I no longer care about being your friend" – evidence that Greg has recovered from caring too much about what other people think about him. Although Greg insisted in the narration that he didn't learn any valuable lessons from what happened with Rachel, the Epilogue proves that she did have a profound effect on his life. He grew as a person by learning about the benefits of getting to know another person and sharing his talent and personality with her and he is going to apply to film school, just like Rachel wanted.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Earl punch Greg in the stomach?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think "Rachel the Film" was as bad as Greg said it was?

Discussion Question 3

In the Epilogue, how is Greg's character different to the way he was at the start of the novel?



Vocabulary

intensive, partially, emitting, contemplated, burden, perceptive, melodramatic, homage, mishmash, pixelated, absurdist, congested, malfunction, chaos, tyrant, narcotics, nuzzle, alienating, ginormous, arrogant



Characters

Greg Gaines

Greg is the central character / protagonist. Greg is a high school student in his senior year. At the start of the novel, Greg's main ambition in life is to make it through high school without joining any particular group of students while still being on friendly terms with everyone. In order to accomplish this, Greg had to avoid becoming close friends with anyone at his high school. By avoiding a normal high school existence and keeping a low profile, Greg thought he could avoid any of the suffering or bullying associated with his high school years. Greg's narration revealed that he was deeply self-conscious with low self-esteem. Through the narration, it became apparent that Greg's fear of judgement and criticism from others prevented him from being himself around his schoolmates and that this was the reason he sought to withdraw from having a normal social life.

Although Greg professed a desire to avoid making normal friendships, he did have one friend. Greg's friendship with Earl is based on their shared love of classic movies and their relationship flourished despite the fact the two boys came from very different backgrounds. In the narration, Greg recounted a time when he and Earl tried to show their favorite film - *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* – to some of their classmates, all of whom hated the film. This symbolized the fact that the two boys were different than other kids their age.

The boys make their own films together but refused to show them to anyone else. On the surface, Greg explained that they simply didn't think the films were good enough to share, but the subtext of this decision relates to Greg's fear of judgement and criticism: he would rather keep the films to himself, guaranteeing that no one else could enjoy them, than share them with others and risk finding out that some people didn't like them. This is a metaphor for Greg's attitude to life: he would rather have superficial contact with everyone at school than form real friendships with a certain group of people. He would rather hide his true self from everyone, guaranteeing that no one could get to know him or care about him, than be open and honest about who he is and risk some people not liking him.

Greg's life started to change when his mom persuaded him to reconnect with Rachel Kushner. Although socially awkward and prone to saying strange things, Greg has many likeable qualities, most notably his sense of humor. Because Greg is well known for this quality his mom and Rachel's mom teamed up to suggest that Greg could make Rachel laugh and cheer her up after she was diagnosed with leukemia. Greg is forced into these interactions with Rachel and can't maintain his usual level of disconnection and superficiality over such an extended period of time. As a result of this, he ends up revealing his true character to Rachel who genuinely enjoys his company and laughs at his jokes. The fact that Rachel is one of the only people who knows the real Greg is symbolized by her love of the films Greg and Earl make together. She understands who



the boys really are and appreciates them for it. Although Rachel dies, Greg's friendship with her is his first step towards authenticity and worrying less about what other people think of him.

Earl Jackson

Earl Jackson is a high school senior and Greg's best friend. Greg explained in the narration that because their high school bordered one affluent area of Pittsburgh and one poorer area, there was a big mixture of students from wildly different backgrounds at the school. Earl is from the poorer part of town, where he lives with his two brothers, his three half-brothers, and his mom. Both his dad and his stepdad have no contact with the family. His mom is unemployed and has few interactions with her sons and Earl is the only one of the brothers who attends school regularly.

Earl has a very tough life and his friendship with Greg provides a kind of sanctuary, both mental and physical. The Gaines family home provides Earl with a safe and quiet retreat from the noise and violence of his own home, and his filmmaking with Greg provides him with an outlet for his creativity and passion. Although Earl is depicted as having a violent temper in Greg's narration, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Earl is considerably more mature and emotionally developed than Greg, despite having a much more challenging upbringing.

The author uses Earl's life as a contrast to Greg's life in order to highlight the fact that Greg's life is easy and his problems are minor. Because the story is told in the first-person from Greg's perspective, the reader is drawn in to perceiving Greg's problems as serious and painful. This perception is undercut by Earl's character who faces much more serious and difficult challenges in life than Greg. Earl's character is often used as the voice of reason in the narrative, which is ironic for a character known for his temper tantrums. When Greg got mad at Earl for telling Rachel about their films, Earl criticized him for caring too much about what other people think of him, and when Greg fell behind at school because he was struggling to cope with his grief, Earl (gently) pointed out to him that this was the only hard thing that had ever happened to Greg.

Earl's difficult background has become an asset for him because it has made him more resilient and mature than Greg. However the author does not suggest that having a challenging upbringing is an advantage in life: it is made clear that Earl's chances for success in life are severely limited by the poverty of his upbringing. Unlike Greg, Earl can't entertain the dream of going to film school and must instead focus on finding a way to support himself financially.

Rachel Kushner

Rachel is another senior at Greg's high school. Rachel and Greg first met at Hebrew school when they were in the sixth grade. Greg pretended to have a crush on Rachel as part of a failed attempt to make another girl in their class jealous. When Rachel responded positively to Greg's attention by suggesting that they should hang out



together after class, Greg panicked and started to come up with increasingly bizarre excuses until Rachel eventually got upset and stopped speaking to him. Because of that awkward phase in their past, Rachel is initially suspicious of Greg's attempts to befriend her again after she is diagnosed with leukemia. However Greg wins her over with his sense of humor, and later through the films he makes with Earl, and the two of them become good friends.

Rachel's relationship with Greg is contrasted with his other relationships in the novel. Whereas Greg's mom is constantly hassling him to do things he doesn't want to do, Rachel doesn't pressure Greg to anything: when he doesn't want to tell her the contents of a message from Earl, Rachel says that's fine, and when his mom tells Rachel about his filmmaking career she tells him that he doesn't have to show her the films if he doesn't want to. In the narration Greg explained that his main tactic for avoiding close friendships was to let the other person do all of the talking, but when Greg is with Rachel he is the one who talks constantly. Greg is known for his sense of humor, but in their second phone call Rachel is the one who makes Greg laugh.

Rachel's leukemia is important to the story only insofar as it affects Greg's life. There is a tendency throughout the history of literature to use women and girls as catalysts and love interests for male characters rather than as independent characters or protagonists in their own right and that is certainly the case with Rachel in this novel. However the author is clearly aware of this tendency and makes reference to it within the narrative itself: Greg eventually comes to realize that the film he and Earl made for Rachel wasn't about her at all. It was about Greg and Earl. Greg became very angry with himself for not making a film about Rachel's life, personality, thoughts, and perspective and was distraught at the thought that all of these things will be lost when she dies. This is a reflection of Greg's self-absorption: by focusing on his own doubts and anxieties, he lost the only chance he would have to get to know Rachel properly. The reason so little of Rachel's personality is revealed in the novel is to make this moment more poignant. After her untimely death Greg, and by extension the reader, has lost the opportunity to discover more about her character.

Marla Gaines

Marla Gaines is Greg's mom. She functions as a catalyst character in the novel because it is her idea to get Greg to reconnect with Rachel. When Rachel dies, Marla feels guilty because she can see how difficult and upsetting Rachel's death is for Greg and she knows that Greg only became friends with Rachel because of her interference. In some ways, Marla is also the antagonist in the novel. Greg's goal in the narrative is to avoid any social interaction as much as possible and his mom consistently prevents him from achieving this goal by setting him up on playdates years after everyone else's parents have stopped meddling in their kids' lives and by forcing him to contact Rachel.



Mr. McCarthy

Mr. McCarthy is a teacher at Greg's high school. Mr. McCarthy is a mentor figure for Greg. He notices when Greg starts to struggle at school when Rachel's health deteriorates and he intervenes to offer Greg after-school lessons so that Greg falling behind in his senior year doesn't haunt him for the rest of his life. Many of his mannerisms and personality traits are designed to give the reader the impression that Mr. McCarthy is always stoned. He has a shaved head and is covered in tattoos, loudly declares odd catchphrases such as "TRUE FACT" and "RESPECT THE RESEARCH", and eats Vietnamese soup from a thermos, a ritual he calls "consulting the oracle". This leads to a humorous scene when Greg and Earl get really high after eating some of Mr. McCarthy's soup despite him telling them they weren't allowed to. It is later revealed that it was actually the cookies Earl took from his brother that were laced with marijuana, not Mr. McCarthy's soup. Mr. McCarthy's character is used to give the reader an alternative perspective on the events of the novel. Although Greg insists in his narration that he wasn't that emotionally invested in what was happening to Rachel, the reader can tell through the concerned reactions of characters like Mr. McCarthy that Greg was really struggling even if he was unwilling to admit it.

Denise Kushner

Denise Kushner is Rachel's mom. She conspired with Marla Gaines to get Greg to befriend Rachel in an attempt to cheer her up after her diagnosis. Her main impression of Greg is that he is very funny and she always laughs at his jokes when they see each other (apart from the one occasion when Greg turns up to her house stoned). She is clearly fond of Greg and is offended by his suggestion that some people find him obnoxious. She praises him and tells him to ignore such criticism and always be himself. Her character is used as a contrast to Greg's grief. Because the lesson Greg must learn is that his problems are minor compared to the difficulties of those around him, Denise's grief at her daughter's illness and eventual death is an important counterpoint to Greg's difficulty coping with the same circumstances. As Earl pointed out, Rachel's death is the only bad thing that has ever happened to Greg and it pales into insignificance when compared with the suffering of Denise.

Madison Hartner

Madison Hartner is a senior at Greg's high school and her character is the love interest in the novel. Unusually for a novel in this genre, Greg never makes any progress with his crush on Madison, neither winning her over nor discovering that she was wrong for him. Madison's character is used as a way to undermine the truth of Greg's narration, through contrast with Rachel. Unlike when he is with Rachel, when Greg is with Madison he can never relax, be himself, or say what's on his mind. Whereas Rachel understands why Greg is uncomfortable talking about his films, Madison pressures Greg to talk about it, even going so far as asking him to make a film for Rachel. While Rachel loves the Gaines/Jackson films, Madison doesn't understand them and only



compliments Greg about them in order to be polite. Greg insists in the narration that his friendship with Rachel wasn't really that important to him but, through the contrast with his interactions with Madison, the reader can intuit that his relationship with Rachel was, in fact, a unique and important part of Greg's life, making her death all the more tragic.

Victor Gaines

Victor Gaines is Greg's dad. He plays a much less influential role in the narrative than Greg's mom and is contrasted to Marla through his passive attitude and belief that Greg should be left alone. Greg inherited his love of movies from his dad when he and Earl discovered Victor's DVD collection which included *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. Victor functions as a father figure for both Greg and Earl. Although neither Earl's biological father nor his stepdad play an active role in his life, Earl still has a positive male influence in the form of Victor with whom he shares a love of movies and weird meat-based food products from the local wholefood store.

Principal Stewart

Principal Stewart only appears in one chapter, when Greg and Earl's film for Rachel is screened at the pep rally. Greg describes Principal Stewart as "a giant, terrifying black man" and claims that his usual facial expression is "Pissed".

Greg's Sisters and Earl's Brothers

Greg and Earl's siblings are used as a way to highlight the differences between Greg and Earl's lives and to underscore the relative severity of their problems. Although Gretchen annoys Greg with her temper tantrums and tendency to storm away from the dinner table when she is upset by a joke, Earl's brothers are physically aggressive and violent towards Earl during their frequent tantrums.



Symbols and Symbolism

Aguirre, the Wrath of God

Aguirre, the Wrath of God is a 1972 film directed by Werner Herzog. Greg and Earl's first attempt at filmmaking is a remake of Aguirre, the Wrath of God. The movie becomes significant for multiple reasons throughout the novel but it is, at heart, a symbol of friendship. When Earl and Greg first discover the movie they love it and try to share it with their other classmates who all hate it or think it's really weird. This symbolizes that the bond between Greg and Earl is something special which they don't share with anyone else. It becomes significant again when Rachel asks Greg what his favorite movie is and he chooses to show her Aguirre, the Wrath of God. This action symbolizes the growing closeness between Greg and Rachel. Greg tries to avoid becoming close friends with anyone because he fears that if people get to know what he's really like, they won't like him. When Greg shows Rachel Aguirre, the Wrath of God, it proves that he feels comfortable enough with her to share something that is important to him without fearing her judgement.

Gaines/Jackson DVDs

Greg and Earl are initially embarrassed by their filmmaking efforts and go to great lengths to make sure that no one else sees them. They destroy all of the original footage and only keep two copies of each film on DVD: one for Greg and one for Earl. The secrecy surrounding the DVDs is symbolic of Greg's insecurities. He is scared that if people get to know him they won't like him or will criticize him so he avoids becoming close friends with anyone other than Earl. This is reflected in the DVDs which Greg refuses to share with anyone other than Earl. When Rachel becomes a fan of the DVDs it is symbolic of the power of being authentically yourself. Although Greg fears revealing himself (and by extension, his films), when Rachel watches them she loves them. If Greg was willing to share the films with more people they might find even more people like Rachel who enjoy watching them, but Greg's fear of criticism means he refuses to share them with anyone in case they don't like them. He would rather no one ever saw their movies than to have some people see them and hate them. The tragedy of this kind of approach to life is symbolized by the destruction of the DVDs. At the height of their grief, both boys destroy their copies of the DVDs, meaning that all of their movies are permanently lost. Not only that, but their only fan has now died and it is impossible for anyone else to ever share in the experience of watching them. Because of Greg's refusal to risk criticism and judgement, all of their work is lost.

Rachel the Film

The Gaines/Jackson film "Rachel the Film" is symbolic of Greg's self-absorption. He struggles to come up with the right way to make the film and realizes too late that he



was thinking about himself when he should have been thinking about Rachel. He wishes he had taken the opportunity to ask Rachel about her thoughts and opinions so that there could have been a record of who she was and what she was like before she died. The film is also symbolic of Greg's refusal to be honest about how he feels. Earl offers a heartfelt speech to the camera in which he tells Rachel how glad he is to have gotten the chance to know her, but all Greg can say is that he believes Rachel will get better, which is a lie. When the film is shared with the entire school, Greg's worst fears come true when the other students hate the film. This serves to highlight how minor Greg's problems are compared with Rachel and Earl. Earl fears that he will be trapped in poverty and Rachel's greatest fear is that she will die, whilst Greg's only real fear is that he will be embarrassed at school.

Film School

Film School is symbolic of the differences between Greg and Earl's backgrounds. Both boys have the talent, creativity, and passion for movies necessary to get into Film School but their reasons for not wanting to apply are different. Earl can't afford college and his unstable background has led to him underachieving at school, making it impossible for him to qualify for a scholarship. For Earl, Film School is simply not a practical option. For Greg, on the other hand, all of his blocks to attending Film School are mental. He has been given every advantage in life he would need in order to be able to attend Film School and the only thing stopping him from achieving his dreams is his own self-doubt. When he writes in the Epilogue that he intends to apply to Film School instead of re-registering at Pitt, it is a sign that he has recovered from his crushing insecurities and has grown as a person.

College Directory

The College Directory that Greg's parents give to him is symbolic of the different prospects in life that Greg and Rachel will face. Whereas Greg has his entire life ahead of him, Rachel will die before the end of her senior year in high school. Greg leaves the directory with Rachel in the hospital as a way to try to convince her he doesn't think she will die and that she will apply to college the following year. Rachel uses the directory as a way to encourage Greg and Earl to make the most of their lives when she goes through it, highlights all of the Film Schools, and tells Greg and Earl that she wants them to apply.

The Cafeteria

The Cafeteria at Greg's high school is symbolic of his social anxiety. Greg puts great effort into making sure he never shows allegiance to any particular group at school because he believes that, this way, he can avoid having anybody dislike him. The cafeteria is the one location where this is impossible to achieve, because everyone is forced to make a decision about who to sit with for lunch, thus showing their



allegiances. In order to get out of this problem, Greg usually eats his lunch in Mr. McCarthy's classroom with Earl.

Leukemia

Rachel's leukemia is symbolic of Greg's privilege and self-absorption. Through his narration, the reader becomes familiar with all of Greg's problems and how seriously he takes them. The presence of leukemia as a theme in the novel serves to foreground the fact that Greg's concerns are relatively minor compared to the difficulties other characters face.

Mr. McCarthy's Soup

Mr. McCarthy's soup is symbolic of his different status to all of the other adults in Greg's life. Because the reader is led to believe the soup is laced with marijuana, it becomes symbolic of Mr. McCarthy's unusual attitude to life and makes him seem cooler and more laidback than the other adults in Greg's life.

Weird Food

Weird food items bought by Greg's dad Victor Gaines are a symbol of the unlikely bond between Mr. Gaines and Earl, a hippy, intellectual college professor and a semi-illiterate teenage boy with anger management issues. Victor's predilection for disgusting foodstuffs makes him unpopular with the rest of the family, most notably with Greg's sister Gretchen, but Earl appreciates them and always grabs whichever of Victor's purchases is in the refrigerator when he comes to visit and sometimes joining Victor on his trips to the store.

Spinning Tarantula

In the Gaines/Jackson film "Rachel the Film" one of the shots features a spinning tarantula, which Greg and Earl filmed using a paperweight made of a dead tarantula encased in glass. The tarantula symbolizes Greg's fear of criticism: after "Rachel the Film" is screened at the pep rally, the other students regularly mention the tarantula to Greg, reminding him of the pain of sharing his work with people who didn't like it.



Settings

Gaines Family Home

The Gaines family home provides a sanctuary for Earl away from the violence and noise of his own home. It is at this location that Greg and Earl first watch *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and it is here that the boys first begin to make films together. Although the Gaines family home represents safety and stability for Earl, that is not entirely the case for Greg. Greg doesn't feel entirely at ease in his own home because of his mom's frequent interference in his life. Greg's mom regularly disturbs him at home when he wants to be alone and eavesdrops on Greg and Rachel when they are watching a movie together and interrupts them to tell Rachel that Greg makes his own films. As with all contrasts in the novel between Earl and Greg, the relatively minor downsides of life in the Gaines family home are used to highlight how much easier Greg's life is than Earl's.

Jackson Family Home

The Jackson family home is in a less affluent part of town than the Gaines family home. In the narration, Greg suggests that in some ways Earl's home life was something to be envied in the eyes of other teenage boys. Earl lives with virtually no parental supervision, meaning that he and his brothers are able to "play video games and eat Domino's pizza pretty much all of the time". However Greg goes on to list the downsides of these living arrangements including the fact that the family's finances are largely supplied through drug deals made by Earl's older brothers, that no one cleans so there is often garbage lying around, and that the lack of discipline between Earl's brothers means that the house is very noisy and often violent. The Jackson family home is a symbol of the difficulties Earl faces in life and is used as a contrast to Greg's home and the advantages that he has in life.

Rachel's Bedroom

Rachel's bedroom provides a sanctuary for Greg in a way similar to the Gaines family home providing a sanctuary to Earl. Greg doesn't feel free to be himself at home or at school but when he's talking to Rachel in her room he relaxes and is happy to talk about himself and his life in a way that he doesn't at any other location in the novel. Rachel's bedroom takes on a sadder significance later in the novel when Rachel and her mom make the decision to stop Rachel's chemotherapy. Although Greg is relieved to be able to visit Rachel in her bedroom again instead of having to see her in the hospital, he also recognizes that her decision to return home reveals that she has decided to die. Rachel's bedroom is covered in posters of the actors Hugh Jackman and Daniel Craig. The reader never discovers many details about Rachel's thoughts and feelings and her love of these two actors in one of the only personality details Greg includes in his narration.



Hospital

The hospital is the location where Greg is forced to confront what is happening to Rachel and how upsetting it is for him. When Rachel is at home, Greg finds it easier to forget that she's sick and to push to the back of his mind the possibility that she will die. Greg struggles to communicate with Rachel in a natural way when he visits her in hospital and he always feels under pressure to cheer her up and make her laugh, which becomes increasingly difficult the more sick Rachel becomes. When Greg visits the cancer ward, he encounters severely ill teenagers such as the patient he nicknames "Gilbert". The contrast between Gilbert's health problems and Greg's infected broken arm is used to highlight how minor Greg's problems are compared to other people his age who he encounters during the course of the novel.

Cafeteria

The Cafeteria is the location which symbolizes Greg's social anxiety. When he chooses to sit with Rachel and her friends in the cafeteria he is concerned that people will notice him and start to make judgements about him based on his actions and behavior. In order to make Madison, Rachel, and Rachel's friends laugh while he has lunch with them, Greg made fun of another student called Scott Mayhew by saying that he looked like an alien. Scott noticed the girls laughing and Greg worried that his actions had made Scott dislike him. The events that take place in the cafeteria symbolize Greg's intense anxiety about what other people, like Scott Mayhew, think of him. Because this location induces so much anxiety, Greg rarely eats his lunch in the cafeteria, instead spending his lunch break with Earl in Mr. McCarthy's classroom.

Mr. McCarthy's Classroom

Mr. McCarthy's classroom is a location where Greg and Earl can cut themselves off from the rest of their high school. Mr. McCarthy is a mentor figure for Greg, so it is fitting that his classroom provides Greg with a safe space to retreat from the horrors of the cafeteria. When "Rachel the Film" is shown at the pep rally, Mr. McCarthy commands Greg and Earl to leave the safe space of his classroom because they must attend the rally. The shift from the classroom to the rally symbolizes Greg's fear and anxiety about being publicly known.



Themes and Motifs

Insecurity and Self-Absorption

The central theme of the novel is Insecurity and Self-Absorption. The journey that Greg's character takes is defined by his gradual realization that his insecurities are caused by his self-absorption and that until he learns to keep his own anxieties and fears in perspective and realize how much easier he has it than everyone else around him he won't be able to fully enjoy his life.

At the start of the novel the reader sympathizes with Greg's insecurities and low self-esteem. The feeling of not fitting in and the anxiety connected with making friends and socializing whilst at high school is something that everyone can identify with. However, as the novel progresses Greg's insecurities become more irritating especially when compared with the much larger problems that Earl and Rachel have to deal with. When Greg continues to be insecure and anxious about what other people think of him, even when faced with Rachel's impending death, it becomes clear that Greg's insecurities are actually rooted in self-absorption. He is obsessed with what other people think of him and it is limiting his ability to see the world around him clearly.

Greg's attitude to life and friendship is reflected in his attitude to the Gaines/Jackson DVDs. In life, Greg would rather avoid making any friends than get to know people and risk discovering that they don't like him. With the Gaines/Jackson films, Greg would prefer it if no one other than he and Earl ever saw their films. Greg believes it would be better for nobody to ever get the chance to enjoy their films than for some people to see them and dislike them. This attitude continues even after "Rachel the Film" is shown at their school and is widely praised by the teachers. Instead of focusing on the positive feedback the film received, Greg obsessed about the negative reactions. For Greg, the fact that some people he hardly knew didn't like "Rachel the Film" was more important than the fact that Rachel herself enjoyed it. Greg spends so much time worrying about what strangers think of him that it never occurs to him that it's only the opinions of people he cares about that really matter.

Although Greg doesn't openly acknowledge that he has learned a lesson and grown as a person in relation to his insecurity and self-absorption, it is made clear that this has occurred when Earl confronts him about it. During a foul-mouthed tirade, Earl criticized Greg for being too concerned about what other people think about him and told Greg that no one cares about him anyway. He's spending all of his time worrying about the opinions of people who rarely even give him a second thought. Earl reproached Greg for his self-absorption by pointing out that he treats Rachel as if she is a burden for him, despite the obvious fact that her problems are much more serious than his. The fact that the author has Greg choose to include this outburst in his narration demonstrates that the conversation has struck a chord with Greg, even if he is reluctant to admit that the events in the novel changed him as a person.



Privilege

Privilege is another major theme in the novel which is explored through the comparisons and contrasts between Greg's life and Earl's life. In many ways the boys are remarkably similar. They are both loners who find it difficult to make friends at school, they share a similar sense of humor, they have the same taste in movies, and both are passionate about making their own films. The thing that puts Greg and Earl onto different paths in life isn't their personality or abilities, it's their background.

Because of his privileged background, Greg has reached his senior year of high school without having to deal with anything particularly difficult or upsetting ever happening to him. This is in marked contrast to Earl, whose family life disintegrated around him during his childhood which led him to experiment with drugs. As a result of this, Earl has developed a resilience and a maturity that Greg lacks. Whenever Greg becomes anxious and starts to panic about the right thing to do or say to Rachel, Earl steps in with an empathic and mature response. Earl tells Greg he has to visit Rachel the day before she has chemotherapy in order to cheer her up, and when they get there Earl suggests they should all go out for ice cream. Earl offers to show Rachel the Gaines/Jackson DVDs when she expresses an interest in them and he calls the hospital to check the visiting hours once Rachel begins her chemotherapy. None of these actions occurred to Greg because he was not used to dealing with such serious situations. After Rachel's death, Earl pointed out to Greg that the reason he is taking it so hard is because it is the first time anything bad has ever happened to him.

Greg's privilege is symbolized by the boys' different attitudes towards Rachel's request that they both apply for film school. For Greg, the only barriers to applying are emotional and psychological: he doesn't want to make any more films because they remind him of Rachel and he doesn't want to pursue his talent for filmmaking because he is scared of sharing his work with other people. Earl's reasons for not applying to Film School are much more realistic: he doesn't have the money to attend or good enough grades to qualify for a scholarship. Earl has a realistic attitude to his chances in life and understands that aiming for a retail job, like a management position at Wendy's, is what he needs to do in order to be able support himself. Unlike Greg, Earl doesn't have the luxury of pursuing his dreams.

Friendship

Although Greg professes in the opening chapter that his main aim in life is to avoid making friends, the novel is, at heart, a story that is all about friendship. Greg thinks of friendship as a risk, because it brings with it the risk of judgement and criticism which Greg fears.

Greg's friendships with Earl and Rachel are equally important in the novel and both of these friends teach Greg valuable lessons about life and about his own character flaws. Through Rachel, Greg starts to understand the downside of his decision to avoid making any friends. With her, he can relax and be himself rather than existing in the



constant state of panic and insecurity he feels when talking to characters like Madison Hartner. By witnessing Rachel lose her life Greg comes to realize that he is wasting his own life by refusing to make an effort or become involved in anything going on in the world around him.

Earl is much more mature than Greg and his friendship helps Greg to deal with Rachel's illness and death in a more grown up manner. Earl guides Greg towards doing the right thing and encourages him (usually through the medium of curse words) to keep his problems in perspective and not allow himself to become too self-absorbed.

Making the Most of Life

Rachel's illness and eventual death teach Greg an important lesson about making the most of life. By refusing to become friends with anyone at his high school and refusing to share his filmmaking talent with anyone other than Earl, Greg is essentially refusing to participate in life. He would rather play a passive role in his own life than risk making a mistake or doing something that makes him feel uncomfortable. Through Rachel's death, Greg comes to realize how lucky he is to even have a future to feel uncertain about.

This theme is explored in Chapter 24 when Greg shows Rachel the college directory that was given to him by his parents. Greg resents the directory because it makes him anxious about his future. He worries that if he goes to college he won't be able to carrying on being "bland and inoffensive and unmemorable" because he'll be living in a dormitory. When Greg talks about college applications with Rachel when she's in the hospital, it becomes apparent just how preposterous Greg's fears are. Rachel isn't thinking about applying to college because she doesn't expect to live long enough to be able to attend. This puts Greg's concerns into sharp perspective. Unlike Rachel, Greg has the opportunity to make the most of his future. When he announces in the Epilogue that he intends to apply to Film School it is a sign that he has decided to forget about his petty concerns and make the most of his life, knowing now that not everyone is lucky enough to be able to do so.

Movies

Movies are a recurring motif in the novel and they unite the three main characters. Greg, Earl, and Rachel are all characterized in relation to their love of movies: Greg and Earl through their initial discovery of *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and the movies they make together, and Rachel through her movie star poster collection. The growing connection between all three characters is symbolized by movies. It is made clear that Greg is starting to think of Rachel as a friend when he watches *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* with her even after the disastrous experience of the previous time he tried to share the movie with other schoolmates. Rachel expresses her friendship for Greg and Earl through her fandom for the films they make together and by going through the college directory looking for film schools which she later asks the boys to apply to.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told mostly in the first person from Greg's perspective; however, within Greg's perspective a number of different styles of writing are used. The most obvious of these is that Greg, as an amateur filmmaker, often writes his story in screenplay format instead of in prose. The differences in style reflect Greg's different attitudes to what is going on in his life. The main stylistic difference between prose fiction and screenplay format is that in prose a character can share their motivation for doing something, what they were thinking about when they did something, and how they feel. In screenplays, the reader is restricted to only knowing what actions the character takes and what words they use in the dialogue. For this reason, there is less straightforward sharing of internal feelings in the screenplay format and this is reflected in Greg's narration. During scenes in which something especially difficult or emotional is happening, Greg switches to writing in screenplay format (for example his initial phone conversations with Rachel, the chapter in which Greg's mom tells Rachel about his filmmaking, and the conversation with his mom in the hospital when Rachel dies).

Although all of the information readers get about the story is filtered through Greg, the author uses various techniques to show that Greg is an unreliable narrator. In his narration Greg insists that Rachel's deteriorating health wasn't really affecting him, but the reader can tell from the reactions of characters like Mr. McCarthy that Greg was clearly struggling with his emotions at that time. Greg is extremely self-conscious and self-absorbed which means that his narration can become irritating at times, especially when his problems are compared to the larger problems of Earl and Rachel. The irritation is mitigated by how funny Greg is and by the use of Earl as a voice for the frustrations of the reader. Whenever Greg's behavior stops being funny and becomes annoying (for example when Greg confronts Earl for telling Rachel about the film they're making for her) Earl's response puts Greg in his place. Earl tells Greg to stop obsessing so much about what other people think of him, insisting that no one really cares what he does. Later he tells Greg that the reason Rachel's death was so difficult for him was because he hadn't experiences anything hard before in his life.

When Greg is in hospital with a broken arm, the story of who came to visit him is told through a series of lists featuring only the dialogue of the person who came to visit him, a humorous technique which gave insight into each of the characters who visited. Notably, in this section, none of the letters in Earl's dialogue were capitalized and he didn't speak in full sentences. This reflected Earl's lack of formal education but was also contrasted with the intelligent and mature response he had to Greg's injury when he met with all of Greg's teachers to ask them for his homework assignments. Tellingly, in this section, Greg's interaction with Madison is not presented in list format. Although Greg has a crush on Madison, he doesn't really know her, and he would need to have some insight into her personality before he could write about her in the informal shorthand way he writes about Earl, his mom and his dad.



Language and Meaning

Greg is plagued by self-doubt and is hugely self-critical. To demonstrate this, his choice of words – especially in the narration – is self-deprecating and harsh. He regularly reveals that certain incidents filled him with so much self-loathing that they made him want to punch himself in the face. Greg is not only critical of his own past actions but is also critical of his own writing, so that the narration is often a comment on the content of the book itself, for example when he observes that “the last paragraph is so stupid I couldn’t even bring myself to delete it”. What saves Greg from becoming a whiny or irritating character is his sense of humor and the narration is filled with jokes and witty observations which make the reader sympathize with him even when he’s saying something weird or behaving oddly.

Greg is articulate, has a wide vocabulary and, for the most part, speaks and writes in a grammatically correct fashion. This is contrasted with Earl’s use of language which is colloquial, heavily features slang terms and swear words, and is ungrammatical in many instances (e.g. “I fucking gave her some of them dumb-ass films to watch, because she like the only person that do give a fuck.”) Although this could initially appear to be a condescending way of highlighting Earl’s poor background it is actually used to highlight the differences in maturity between Greg and Earl. Although Greg speaks in a much more adult and correct manner, it is Earl who actually behaves in a more grown up way. He makes sure that Greg goes to visit Rachel before she has chemotherapy and understands that having Rachel as a fan of their films is a blessing not a curse. Although Greg’s use of language makes him sound like he’s smarter than Earl, it is Greg who learns about maturity and the right way to behave from Earl’s example.

Structure

The events of the novel are told in the past tense but Greg’s narration – specifically, his commentary about the act of writing the book – is told in the present tense. The story jumps back and forth through different moments in time. The story of Rachel’s diagnosis, deterioration, and eventual death is told in chronological order but Greg’s narration jumps back and forth in time to fill in the backstory of different characters, for example when he relates how he and Earl first became friends when they were in kindergarten and to describe the creation of various Gaines/Jackson films.

Greg’s narration is written as if he is writing the book right now. He even at one stage suggests that the reader take a break to get some popcorn before a big event and stops writing so that he can get some too, writing: “Actually, I’m gonna go make some popcorn, too. Hang on.” The tone of the narration is informal and conversational and it initially appears that this technique has been chosen solely because it adds to the style. However, in the Epilogue it is revealed that Greg is writing about Rachel’s death as a way to explain the extenuating circumstances that the admissions board should consider as a result of his enrollment being suspended after he failed his first year courses at college. This revelation has numerous effects. Firstly, it retrospectively



explains why the narration is filled with so many instances of Greg protesting that he doesn't want to write the book ("JESUS CHRIST I HATE WRITING ABOUT THIS.") It also reveals that Greg's level of self-loathing is not as bad as the earlier narration has made it seem. He says "I mostly just hate every person I've ever been. I'm actually fine with myself right now." The judgements and criticisms Greg directed at himself were retrospective. It turns out that he was angry with the way he had behaved in the past, rather than permanently angry with himself in the present.

The epilogue also casts a new light on Greg's emotional journey within the narrative. Greg protests throughout the narration that he didn't really care about Rachel and that he was only spending time with her because his mom made him do it. He makes references to common traits of young adult novels and claims that they aren't happening to him in this book: he didn't fall in love with Rachel, her death didn't teach him an important lesson about life. But it transpires that the act of writing the book has been a form of therapy for Greg and when he writes in the epilogue that he will be applying to film school after all, it demonstrates that he did learn an important lesson from Rachel about making the most of life and not trying to hide from doing what you love out of a fear of judgement or criticism.



Quotes

At lunch, before school, and at all other times in public, you must keep an insanely low profile. I mean, just forget about lunch. Lunch is where you are asked to demonstrate your allegiance to once group or another by sitting with them for all to see.

-- Greg (chapter 1 paragraph 14)

Importance: Greg outlines his approach to dealing with high school in his narration by explaining his desire to avoid being noticed by anyone. This quotation sums up Greg's approach to life at the start of novel, but by the end of the novel he becomes comfortable in his own skin and less obsessed with avoiding interactions with other people.

What you're seeing here is just part of the larger pattern of Mom-Greg Life Interference. She was without a doubt the single biggest obstacle between me and the social life I was trying to describe before: a social life without friends, enemies, or awkwardness.

-- Greg (chapter 6 paragraph penultimate)

Importance: In this quote Greg states his goal in life and explains the ways his mom acts as the antagonist to his goals. The novel will be a conflict between Greg's desire to keep himself to himself and his mom's desire to force him into actions with others. This quote also foreshadows the moment where Greg's mom secretly arranges a screening of "Rachel the Film" at his high school.

This was unexpected. It had never happened before. Rachel had made me laugh.

-- Greg (chapter 8 paragraph 13)

Importance: Greg says this in reference to Rachel during one of their early phone calls. It marks an important turning point in the novel because it is the first moment Greg starts to warm towards Rachel's company. Although he feels his mom has forced him to spend time with her, when she makes him laugh, he starts to realize that he actually enjoys her company.

But one thing you could say about Rachel was this: She wasn't constantly trying to fuck up your plans.

-- Greg (chapter 10 paragraph 38)

Importance: When Greg says this about Rachel it is an example of comic understatement. Because Greg is so relentlessly negative and pessimistic he is unable to ever say anything nice or admit that he is happy about something. The reader knows that these words actually represent a huge compliment to Rachel, because Greg is usually so unwilling to say anything positive at all.

It was a disaster, but it was also useful. It made us conscious of what we had really known all along: We were different from the other kids.

-- Greg (chapter 11 paragraph 30)



Importance: Greg reaches this conclusion after he and Earl invited some of their other schoolmates to watch Aguirre, the Wrath of God. Everyone else hated it and it made Greg and Earl realize that they had different tastes to everyone else. This is significant because it makes Greg believe that no one will ever enjoy the Gaines/Jackson films. When the boys meet Rachel, they discover a kindred spirit like them who appreciates the same things. It also foreshadows the screening of “Rachel the Film” at the pep rally, in which once again all of the other students hate what Greg and Earl have made them watch.

I can't believe you're still reading this. You should smack yourself in the face a couple of times right now, just to complete the outstandingly stupid experience that is this book.
-- Greg (chapter 11 paragraph 32)

Importance: Greg is so filled with self-loathing and insecurity that he even goes so far as to criticize the reader for continuing to read his book.

Rachel was using my own tactics against me. Props to her. This is some high-concept judo behavior. She orchestrated our conversations so that I did the talking and she did the listening. Sure enough, this made me like spending time with her. I told you this tactic is awesome.

-- Greg (chapter 12 paragraph 7)

Importance: Although Greg continues to insist throughout the narration that he wasn't actually that close to Rachel, quotes like this prove that they had become close friends. The quote is humorous because of Greg's suggestion that it's necessary to manipulate people into being friends.

Could we use the word “friend”? I guess. Rachel was my friend. You should know that writing that sentence didn't feel good. It just didn't. Having friends is how your life gets fucked up.

-- Greg (chapter 14 paragraph 1)

Importance: Because Greg's goal in life is to avoid making any friends, when he realizes that he has become friends with Rachel he treats it like it's a disaster. Greg believes that making connections and being friends with other people will only lead to being hurt. Unfortunately, in the case of Rachel, becoming friends with her really did lead to Greg being hurt by her death. But by the end of the novel, Greg appreciates Rachel's friendship and doesn't regret getting to know her.

The girl lyin there on her goddamn deathbed and you come to my house all whinin and cryin and shit about some irrelevant bullshit.

-- Earl (chapter 34 paragraph 24)

Importance: These are the words Earl uses to call out Greg about his self-absorbed behavior. He points out that Greg's problems are minor compared to the real struggles that Rachel faces and criticizes him for being so caught up on his own insecurities.



I admire a lot of things about you. I admire how smart you are, how perceptive, and observant. But, uh. What I'm just really in awe of is your, uh, I don't know how to put it. I guess, your patience. If it was me, I would be angry and miserable, and, and hurtful, and just terrible to be around. And you've been so strong throughout, and so patient, even when things aren't going right, and I'm in awe of that. And you've made me feel, uh, blessed.

-- Earl (chapter 35 paragraph 7)

Importance: When Earl says this to Rachel in "Rachel the Film" it is a sign of how much more mature he is than Greg. Earl is able to honestly articulate his feelings making his contribution much more powerful and heartfelt than Greg's words. It also shows how self-aware Earl is: he is aware of his own temper problem and knows that he wouldn't be able to handle leukemia as well as Rachel has.

So. If this was some normal fictional young-adult book, this is the part of the story where after the film, the entire high school would rise to their feet and applaud, and Earl and I would find True Acceptance and begin to Truly Believe in Ourselves, and Rachel would somehow miraculously make a recovery, or maybe she would die but we would Always Have Her to Thank For Making Us Discover Our Inner Talent.

-- Greg (chapter 38 paragraph 1)

Importance: This summary from Greg about why the events following the screening of "Rachel the Film" don't follow the usual patterns for a young adult book is ironic. He insists that he's telling a different kind of story, but during the Epilogue it is revealed that writing about what happened to Rachel really has made Greg discover his inner talent when he decides to apply to film school after all.

I hate to get on you for this. I'm not getting on you for this, but I'm just telling you. This is the first... negative thing that happened to you in your life. And you can't be overreacting and making big-ass expensive decisions based on it. I'm just saying. People die.

-- Earl (chapter 40 paragraph 20)

Importance: Earl tries to give Greg some perspective on what happened to Rachel by pointing out that the reason he's finding it so difficult is that he hasn't had to deal with anything this hard before. Earl cautions Greg to be careful about overreacting to something when lots of other people have had to deal with much harder events in their life.