

# **Med Head: My Knock-down, Drag-out, Drugged-up Battle with My Brain Study Guide**

**Med Head: My Knock-down, Drag-out, Drugged-up Battle with My Brain by James Patterson**

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# Plot Summary

Med Head is the extraordinary story of Cory Friedman's struggle to overcome debilitating behavior conditions Tourette's Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and an anxiety disorder. Narrated from Cory's point of view, Med Head takes its readers on the harrowing medical journey from the onset of Cory's condition to the depths of his despair, and the miraculous disappearance of his symptoms.

Cory's first "tic" or uncontrollable body movement happens when he is four years old and he has the strange urge to twist his neck to the side while he is playing video games. He twists his neck but a few moments later, the urge returns again and again until he is twisting his neck almost constantly. An early misdiagnosis of Cory's condition put him on medication that only exacerbated his problems. Soon, he was twitching and ticcing with nearly every part of his body: his limbs, his face, his voice, etc. Some of his most exhausting tics including hopping, raising his middle fingers into the air, cursing, and throwing himself on the ground. Some of Cory's tics are so extreme that they cause him, and his surroundings, physical damage. He breaks his teeth by gnashing them, destroys his shower tiles by jumping on them, causes a car accident by pulling on the steering wheel, and tears muscles in his back by jerking side-to-side. Cory's constant ticcing affects everyone around him. His parents are exhausted by the constant strange behavior, classmates cannot concentrate on their studies when he's around, Cory's sister hides away in her bedroom to avoid annoying contact with him. Teachers call him a distraction, friends grow embarrassed of his behavior, and doctors call him a puzzle. Cory feels lost in his conditions and frustrated that no one can find a cure.

From the age of five to sixteen, Cory visits a steady stream of new doctors, each promising that their concoction of medications will be the answer to his problems. Each medication brings its own set of side-effects, from increased tics to bouts of rage to catatonic states of unconsciousness. Cory also tries a variety of behavioral therapies, none of which seem to help his increasingly troublesome behaviors. The only thing that seems to help, the only thing that makes Cory feel "normal" is alcohol. He discovers vodka's calming effect while he is in a bout of rage at the age of sixteen. Soon, he is completely dependent on alcohol to control his moods, a dangerous dependence for any individual, let alone an individual taking an assortment of anti psychotic, anti-seizure medications. Since Cory doesn't have any friends at school, his parents allow him to hang out with the wrong set of friends, other alcoholics and druggies, simply so he can have some socialization in his life. One evening, after drinking a bottle of vodka, Cory falls asleep on the couch with a lit cigarette in his mouth and nearly burns down the house. After this, his parents decide that he needs an intervention.

Med Head actually opens with the scene of Cory's parents bringing him to a mental institution trained to deal with teenaged alcoholics. After realizing that Cory would be ostracized and tormented for his other conditions, and that the hospital is set up like an old-fashioned insane asylum, they remove him from the facility against medical orders and send him on a wilderness retreat in the mountains. There, Cory learns to rely on his body to save him rather than harm him. When her returns home, he is a changed man



who, for the first time in his life, accepts himself for who he truly is, flaws and all. After spending time in a state-of-the-art behavioral analysis hospital, Cory learns new techniques of managing and even subduing some of his tics. One morning, he wakes and is miraculously free of tics. It's unclear whether this newfound freedom is a result of medication, outgrowing his condition, or new forms of therapy, but in some way, the answer to that question doesn't matter. After thirteen years of suffering, Cory Friedman is finally free.



# Part One: A Lost Childhood: At the Edge of Madness: Chapters 1 - 4

## Part One: A Lost Childhood: At the Edge of Madness: Chapters 1 - 4 Summary

At the opening of the novel, seventeen-year-old Cory Friedman lies in the backseat of his parents car "like a pathetic, helpless lump" being driven to the state mental hospital (Page 3). When he sees the hospital name - Dressler Psychiatric Hospital - he panics. Cory is not insane but battling alcohol addiction. He doesn't want to be committed to an insane asylum. His parents tell him not to worry; he'll be safe where he's going. Cory suffers from a variety of medical conditions, including obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's Syndrome, and an anxiety disorder. As soon as he walks into the hospital waiting room, he begins ticcing - raising his middle finger into the air, shooting his tongue out of his mouth, vocalizing a grunt in his throat - these are all nervous tics that he cannot control, yet people in the waiting room stare like he's a monster. Cory is used to this reaction.

Cory is called into the doctor's office to answer some questions about his alcoholism. After, he's given a tour of the hospital where he will be staying. Immediately, Cory begins to panic. This place looks like an asylum: the walls are white and there are no windows. There is hardly any light. The entire building, including the ceilings, is covered in metal grating like a giant cage. Cory begs his parents not to admit him here: he has a problem but he's not insane. He tries to flee but the doors are all locked. He starts crying, begging his parents to reconsider. He can see his arguments are having an effect on them. They, too, see that this hospital may not be the best place to rehabilitate an alcoholic teenager, particularly a teenager with a variety of other conditions. Cory's father finally relents: he wants to take his son home. Unfortunately, the supervising doctor says it's impossible: once a patient is admitted into the hospital, a 72-hour stay is mandatory. The two men argue for a few moments before Cory's father calls his lawyer. He says that he would like to take Cory home against medical advice. Finally, the doctor relents and Cory is allowed to leave the hospital. Cory promises his parents that he is going to quit drinking as soon as he gets home, but he only lasts a few days. By Friday, his body is driving him insane and he knows the only way to quiet the tics is with alcohol. He drinks half a bottle of vodka and passes out on the living room floor.

## Part One: A Lost Childhood: At the Edge of Madness: Chapters 1 - 4 Analysis

The opening section of the novel introduces the reader to Cory Friedman and his various medical conditions. This introduction showcases a variety of Cory's tics and the way they affect his everyday life. Even though Cory is used to being stared at, the



thought of being gawked while in a mental hospital is particularly unbearable. Looking around the hospital, it's clear that Cory will be ostracized for his conditions. Even though it's a hospital prepared for dealing with mental conditions, Cory's case is so severe that even here, he's viewed as a monster. Cory's alcoholism is a result of just such behavior: feeling excluded from society. His parents recognize that his recovery from addiction will only be hindered if the emotional separation continues. Cory needs to be in an environment where he feels settled and accepted of his anxiety will get the best of him.

This opening section also highlights the strong bond Cory shares with his parents. At this stage of his life, his parents have been dealing with his conditions for thirteen years. They are emotionally, physically, and financially exhausted, but they haven't given up hope. Throughout the novel, the reader will see the way Hal and Sophie Friedman battle for their son's mental health. Often going against doctor's orders, these parents fight ruthlessly to ensure Cory receives the best treatment and state-of-the-art therapies. While many parents would throw their hands in the air and accept doctor's orders, Hal and Sophie Friedman know what's best for their son. They've dedicated their entire lives to his health and won't stop fighting until he's cured. The fact that they are willing to call a lawyer and remove Cory from the hospital AMA (Against Medical Advice) shows that they've seen doctors make mistakes in the past. Cory's journey to this point includes a revolving door of doctors, therapies, and medications. Because his case is so severe, doctors have experimented, using Cory as a lab rat, sometimes to disastrous results. Hal and Sophie Friedman are savvy and cynical, knowing doctors don't always have Cory's best interest at heart. Although mistrusting, the Friedmans are ultimately hopeful, even if they have to take Cory's recovery into their own hands.



# **Part One: A Lost Childhood: In the Blink of an Eye, Brainstorm, School Daze, So Hard to Be Good: Chapters 5 - 11**

## **Part One: A Lost Childhood: In the Blink of an Eye, Brainstorm, School Daze, So Hard to Be Good: Chapters 5 - 11 Summary**

The narration jumps back in time to when Cory was five years old and his troubles began. One morning, he wakes with "an unusual, intense tension building up in my neck, and I think the only way to relieve it is to jerk my head to one side" (Page 19). Cory jerks his neck, but a few moments later, the tension returns. This happens throughout the day, and soon, Cory is jerking his neck every few seconds. He tries to stop but the longer he holds back, the stronger the urge becomes. This is Cory's first tic. Cory's parents take him to the doctor who mistakenly diagnosis Cory with ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - and prescribes him Ritalin. Unfortunately, for patients suffering from Tourette's Syndrome like Cory is, Ritalin acts like gasoline on a fire. Two days later, Cory wakes with a symphony of tics. Nearly every part of his face - his ears, eyes, forehead, cheeks, and tongue - has developed tics overnight. That morning at breakfast, he feels the uncontrollable urge to spit chewed food into the faces of his family members. Even though he knows this behavior is inappropriate and disgusting, he simply cannot stop himself. When asked to apologize, Cory repeats the word "Sorry" over and over and over. Cory can't understand what's happening to him, and neither can his family. When they complain to Cory's doctor about the strange behavior, she tells them to wait a few days; his body is adjusting to the Ritalin. Cory's tics and strange behaviors worsen by the hour. He begins mimicking everything people say and incessantly tapping his sister's shoulder. Two weeks later, Dr. Laufton finally agrees: Cory has been misdiagnosed. Instead of having ADHD, she now believes he has Tourette's Syndrome.

With this new diagnosis, Cory's parents find him a new doctor, Dr. Pressler, who prescribes a variety of special medications to slow Cory's tics. While the new medication - which is traditionally used to treat adults with high blood pressure - tires him out, it doesn't stop his ticcing. He becomes obsessed with strange ideas and sensations, from needing to push pens through paper cups to repeatedly washing his hands throughout the day. Many of his obsessions are irrational, like his obsessive need for his mother to be first in the carpool line to pick him up from school. If she isn't, Cory falls to the ground weeping, sure his mother is going to die. Now that he's a teenager, Cory has tried to block out many of his painful memories of elementary school, but he'll never forget the day in first grade when his favorite teacher, Mrs. Wilkens - who had otherwise been understanding of his many special needs - asked him to write the word of the day on the chalkboard. Even though Cory knew the word and how to spell it, he couldn't stop



himself from writing S-H-I-T in huge white letters. He was mortified but unable to stop the compulsion. He knew he had let Mrs. Wilkens down, and the fear of letting people down only added to already paralyzing anxieties.

## **Part One: A Lost Childhood: In the Blink of an Eye, Brainstorm, School Daze, So Hard to Be Good: Chapters 5 - 11 Analysis**

This section of the novel brings the reader into the mindset of a person suffering from Tourette's Syndrome. Cory's intimate narration of ticcing gives the reader unprecedented access into his condition. Through the narration, the reader can almost physically feel the tension building before a tic and can understand the emotional horror at suddenly being unable to control your body: "I jump off my chair and take off to the family room, hooting as I run. I can't understand what's happening or what I'm doing. I love my family and would never spit at them. This isn't me. So who is it?" (p. 24). When the tics begin, Cory feels like he's possessed. In a way, he is: Tourette's Syndrome causes the brain to misfire neurons causing uncontrollable physical and verbal actions. Ritalin, a medication used to treat hyperactivity, has a reverse effect on Tourette's patients. Puzzlingly, rather than slow down neurons, Ritalin speeds them up. As a result, Cory's ticcing is completely out of control. From this moment on, his condition accelerates. Although it's unclear what would have happened to Cory had his condition been identified immediately, Dr. Laufton's course of action certainly caused more harm than good. She is only the first of many doctors who will misdiagnose, mistreat, and over medicate Cory on his journey to freedom.

In conjunction with Tourette's Syndrome, Cory's condition worsens to include Obsessive Compulsive Disorder - a condition that causes him to fixate on certain ideas or behaviors, like spitting food, for example - and an anxiety disorder which causes debilitating, irrational thoughts. It's unclear exactly how these conditions are related, but it's undeniable that the behaviors are interlinked. Despite the fact that each condition has its own set of symptoms, doctors are often unable to deduce which condition causes each behavior, ultimately leading to treatment troubles. Anxiety accelerates Cory's tics, meaning that he tics more often when he's nervous, and when he tics, he becomes more anxious about his behavior. This cycle makes his various conditions very difficult to identify and treat.





# **Part One: A Lost Childhood: Danger Everywhere, Father and Other F-Words, When Good Turns Bad, Night: Chapters 12 - 17**

## **Part One: A Lost Childhood: Danger Everywhere, Father and Other F-Words, When Good Turns Bad, Night: Chapters 12 - 17 Summary**

Cory develops a terrifying new tic. Whenever he's in the car, he feels a strong compulsion to tap the steering wheel. While he is with his mother one afternoon, Cory cannot stop himself from jerking the wheel towards him, causing a massive car accident. Although he and his mother are okay after the accident, their car is totaled. Soon after, Cory spends his days in the basement with his father building model cars. Cory is obsessed with the tiny pieces and greatly enjoys this bonding time with his father because he has no other friends. While they are working, Cory feels a desperate need to say the "F" word even though he isn't frustrated. He hates swearing almost as much as his parents hate hearing it, which may explain why the "F" word comes out as a stutter: "fu fu fu fu fu" (p. 46). His father knows immediately what he's trying to say, but ignores him.

Despite his difficulties, Cory does relatively well in school. When he is in fourth grade, he has a lovely teacher, Mrs. Erlanger, who is extremely patient and understanding of his special needs. She has even nominated Cory as class messenger, so when his tics are particularly annoying, she sends him to the office to retrieve some paperwork or carry a message. This special treatment riles jealousy in the rest of his classmates. Being class messenger is a coveted position. One afternoon, all that changes. Some of Cory's classmates provoke his tics by making noises similar to his vocalizations, tapping their fingers to elicit Cory's taps, etc. Mrs. Erlanger tries to quiet the class, but she cannot quiet Cory. Something in her snaps and she shouts at Cory to sit in the hallway until he can control himself. Cory is mortified by the punishment. Classmates aren't the only ones to provoke Cory's tics. Even Jessie, Cory's sister and best friend, taunts him when she's feeling frustrated. At times, Cory feels completely alone with his condition.



## **Part One: A Lost Childhood: Danger Everywhere, Father and Other F-Words, When Good Turns Bad, Night: Chapters 12 - 17 Analysis**

There are many times in Cory's life when he feels a frightening compulsion to cause physical harm to himself or others, or to test the danger in situations. These compulsions are likely part of his OCD and are strange behaviors when considering Cory's anxiety disorder. He often fears that his mother has been in a terrible car accident, yet he cannot control himself from causing one. He fears physical pain, yet he cannot stop himself from touching his nose with the hot cigarette lighter or clenching his teeth until they crack. These behaviors highlight the way Cory's condition affects his entire family. His parents must deal with the physical, emotional, and financial drain due to his negative compulsions. Many readers will be shocked by the Friedmans' lack of punishment for Cory's bad behaviors. Most parents would be outraged by his cursing or dangerous behaviors. Unfortunately, reprimanding individuals with Tourette's or OCD only makes their tics worse. Saying certain words or actions are off-limits only makes them more appealing. Patients with Tourette's often feel the need to say or do the most inappropriate thing at any given time, which is why many Tourette's sufferers shout obscenities. Chastising certain words or behaviors casts a spotlight on them, and the obsessive brain fixates on those phrases. Neurons fire over-and-over to that fixated upon spot, causing the patient to repeat those off-limit phrases. Both parents recognize that ignoring unwanted behavior is often the best way to battle them, even though this treatment seems strange to outsiders. Cory's tics go through a "waxing and waning" period based on the medications he takes. Some weeks this tics are out of control, other weeks his tics are almost nonexistent. No matter what dosage or medication he takes, his tics always return, sometimes with a vengeance.



## **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: The Lure of Branches, Resource Room, Mad Menu, The Last Ball Game, To the Ends of the Earth: Chapters 18 - 25**

### **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: The Lure of Branches, Resource Room, Mad Menu, The Last Ball Game, To the Ends of the Earth: Chapters 18 - 25 Summary**

Outside Cory's childhood home is a massive, two hundred year old tree. One afternoon, an overwhelming desire to climb that tree overtakes him. Even though he's never been much of a tree-climber before, he can't stop moving until he reaches the top. For the first half of the climb, Cory's body refuses to obey his brain. It jerks and shakes and squeaks, constantly threatening to throw him from the tree. Cory looks down to see that he's much higher than he expected, which fills him with dread and a desire to keep climbing. He climbs until the tree limbs are so thin he doesn't think they can support his weight, yet he cannot stop climbing. When he reaches the top, he is elated. He has accomplished something wild and dangerous without dying. Up here, no one can see his tics. For the first time in a very long time, Cory feels free.

At school, Cory spends more and more time in the resource room, dedicated to students with learning disabilities. Cory doesn't fully understand why he has to be here. His learning is fine; in fact, he has some of the highest grades in the school. The truth is, teachers often need a break from his distracting tics, and so they send him away for peace of mind. At the age of eleven, Cory grows increasingly frustrated with his doctors: he's been a guinea pig for their medical hypotheses for the past six years. He just wants to get better. No matter what combination of drugs he's given, nothing seems to help, and half the dosages make his tics even worse or cause him to develop strange, unmanageable side effects. One of the only places Cory feels relief is on the pitching mound. Despite his tics, he's become an excellent baseball player, a player that his entire team relies on. Unfortunately, Cory has developed a new compulsion - a voice in his head whispers for him to throw wild balls, to throw them out of the park, or worse, to throw them at the batters. During the final game in his little league series, the opposing team lines up to mock and taunt Cory during the final inning, hoping to throw him off his game. Despite the taunts and the voices in his head, Cory strikes out the last player, securing his team's win. He celebrates the win by jet skiing with his father, a profoundly bonding time.



## **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: The Lure of Branches, Resource Room, Mad Menu, The Last Ball Game, To the Ends of the Earth: Chapters 18 - 25 Analysis**

When Cory is climbing the tree, he feels the uncomfortable urge to keep climbing even though he knows it isn't safe, much like he feels the urge to pull the steering wheel in his mother's car or ride his bike at breakneck speeds. These urges are a symptom of his obsessive compulsive disorder, which makes managing behaviors particularly difficult. What's interesting about the tree-climbing incident is that once Cory reaches the top, he feels a strong sense of accomplishment. He's climbed the tree even though his body didn't want to obey him. Somehow, he managed to maneuver himself safely to the top and there's a great sense of pride in that. As the novel progresses, Cory will discover that this is the key to his cure: trusting his body rather than fighting against it. Also in this section, Cory explores his love of sports and finds that despite his many conditions, he is an excellent athlete. It's interesting to note that the opposing team does its best to rile Cory during their final game. The players, and even the coach, tease and taunt him, mimicking his tics hoping to break his concentration. It's poor sportsmanship at best and heartless bullying at worst. It's shocking to see adults partaking in the taunts as well as students. Despite this, Cory talks himself down from his anxiety. Slowly, he is learning to control his emotions and lessen his tics. He knows he is capable of striking out the players and he must focus on that, not the ways his body betrays him. With each successful day and accomplishment, Cory grows in confidence.



## **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: Ups and Downs, Hope Against Hope, Taking the Cure: Chapters 26 - 31**

### **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: Ups and Downs, Hope Against Hope, Taking the Cure: Chapters 26 - 31 Summary**

The Friedman family spends nearly all their time researching new treatments for Tourette's Syndrome or driving across the country visiting new doctors and hospitals. All the doctors use some level of Risperdal as a way of treating Cory's tics. With each increase of the drug, his tics become wilder and more unpredictable. He develops crippling anxiety and vertigo, yet doctors continually order an increased dosage. When Cory is up to six Risperdal pills a day (six times the usual dosage), his parents say enough is enough. Even though it is dangerous to take patients off Risperdal, the Friedmans decide the risks are worth the reward. Slowly, they wean him off the drug and plead to have his case seen by the leading Tourette's doctor in the nation, at Stringer Clinic for Neurological Movement Disorders. Initially, the doctor, Dr. Holmes, claims she doesn't have time for Cory, but when she hears about his hopping tic, she becomes interested. The Friedmans arrive at their appointment filled with hope. They've heard wonderful things about Dr. Holmes and her treatment. In the waiting room, Cory realizes how serious his condition must be if such a high-profile doctor is willing to see him.

When he meets Dr. Holmes, however, Cory is immediately disappointed. She is a shrewd, all-business doctor who views Cory as a specimen rather than a person. She asks him to demonstrate his tics and, without asking permission, video records him for her files. Dr. Holmes matter-of-factly states that her "radical" new treatment - which isn't usually legal to prescribe in the United States - has had an 80% success rate in her patients. Although they don't want to get their hopes too high, the Friedmans are obviously excited by this high statistic. Cory's hopes come crashing to a halt during his first week on the new drug. On the first night, his body feels restless when he tries to sleep, and by the end of the week, sleep is impossible. His body bounces around in bed as if he's possessed, in a near constant state of seizure: "I'm exhausted from the meds, but it feels like there are thousands of fire ants in my bloodstream. I want to jump out of my skin" (Page 108). When they report Cory's symptoms, the doctor orders an increased dose of the drug. This causes Cory to live in a catatonic state, unable to feed himself as he sits drooling and unresponsive in the chair. Despite this, doctors order yet another increased dose of the new drug. This causes Cory to skyrocket into uncontrollable frenzies where he claws at his skin and begs his mother to kill him. If there had been a gun in the house, Cory has no doubt that he would have used it to end his misery. Terrified, Cory's parents take him off the drug.



## Part Two: Outwards and Downward: Ups and Downs, Hope Against Hope, Taking the Cure: Chapters 26 - 31 Analysis

Once again, this section highlights the ways various doctors experiment on Cory leading to unprecedented levels of overmedication. With the array of medications doctors prescribe, Cory's side effects range from hyperactivity to nearly comatose states of vacancy. Perhaps the most harrowing example of Cory's overmedication occurs when Dr. Holmes prescribes Tetrabenazine. Tetrabenazine is a powerful drug normally used to treat schizophrenia and isn't usually legal to prescribe in the United States. Immediately, it's clear that Dr. Holmes is more interested in her research, and getting Tetrabenazine approved in America, than she is in Cory as a patient: "I turn back to the far wall and try not to think about it. I tell myself that they've seen so many other lab rats they've forgotten rats have feelings, too" (p. 103). The side effects of this drug on Cory's system are horrifying. Cory feels as if he's possessed; he's unable to sleep at night because his limbs won't stop bouncing around in bed. The drug affects him on a cellular level, so even his blood feels like fire ants rushing through his system. Despite these horrific effects, Dr. Holmes ups his dosage again and again until Cory begs for someone to kill him. He is completely out of his mind, even suicidal. Sadistically, it seems as if Dr. Holmes doesn't care about Cory's reaction, she simply wants to know what will happen to a person on such a high dosage of Tetrabenazine. In this case, Cory is overmedicated for her personal research, not for his own treatment. Because so little is known about Tourette's Syndrome and the ways to treat it, many of Cory's doctors were prescribing medications just to see what happened. On some level, this experimentation is necessary to discover a cure, but the widespread practice of overmedicating children can have disastrous results.

What's most interesting about Cory's encounter with Dr. Holmes is his parents' reaction to the overmedication. After making the decision to take Cory off Tetrabenazine, they discuss whether or not they should sue Dr. Holmes for malpractice. Even though it's clear that she acted unethically, the Friedmans are afraid to burn their bridges with her research. It's a demoralizing, helpless feeling to raise a child with a condition no doctors can treat. Dr. Holmes is the leading Tourette's research doctor. Even though she harmed Cory and the Friedmans would likely win a lawsuit against her, they worry that one day, Dr. Holmes might discover a cure that can help Cory. That hope is more valuable than any sum of money courts could award them: "That's the problem with having a condition as hard to treat as mind: there are only a few doctors who have a chance to help, so you can't make them angry or burn bridges no matter what they do to you" (p. 112).



## **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: Holding on, but Just Barely, Tsunami, Rage: Chapters 32 - 35**

### **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: Holding on, but Just Barely, Tsunami, Rage: Chapters 32 - 35 Summary**

Cory begins noticing the way his conditions negatively affect his parents. Many days, he sees that his mother has been crying. His father is constantly stressed out. His sister spends more and more time in her room to escape his annoying behaviors. Cory wonders if his conditions are pulling his family apart. Often, Cory tries to subdue his tics but finds that they're much worse if he holds them back. While playing video games with a friend one afternoon, Cory's tics get the better of him and he begins tapping his friend, Jamie, on the shoulder even though he knows it annoys him. When Cory has tapped one too many times, Jamie begins shouting and storms out of the house. Something about this small encounter breaks what little resolve Cory has left. He feels a new rage building inside him, like a fire burning out of control, or the waves of a tsunami rushing toward a village. In a complete loss of control, Cory hurls himself to the ground and screams at the top of his lungs. He thrashes and heaves and smashes his fists into the ground. In the kitchen, he swallows handfuls of pills trying to quell the anger inside him. Locking his concerned parents out of the room, Cory continues to scream and wail before picking up a butcher knife and holding it to his throat. At the last moment, he hurls the knife away from himself, breaking the kitchen windows. He picks up a bottle of vodka and takes six long chugs. He collapses to the floor and doesn't wake up until the next morning.

### **Part Two: Outwards and Downward: Holding on, but Just Barely, Tsunami, Rage: Chapters 32 - 35 Analysis**

In this section, Cory reaches an emotional breaking point. He has been anxious for days considering the ways his conditions affect his family. For the first time, he realizes how stressed out and emotional his parents are. He's heard of parents splitting up over much smaller stresses, and he fears that his condition will lead to the demise of the family he loves. As with many of his other fears, Cory's anxiety disorder causes him to obsess over these thoughts and he's unable to escape his negative thoughts. When Cory is anxious, he tics more frequently, which causes his stress levels to rise. On the day that he's playing video games with Jamie, this conglomeration of symptoms reaches a boiling point. When Jamie storms out of the house, annoyed by Cory's constant ticcing, Cory feels the full weight of his isolation. The voices in his head tell him that everyone hates him, his friends, his sister, his parents, everyone. He is ruining all their lives.



These devastating thoughts are too much for Cory to process. He blacks out in rage as all the years of frustration, loneliness, and helplessness bubble over. Desperate to silence the rage coursing through his veins, Cory turns for the first time to alcohol. Unfortunately for him, the numbing effect of the vodka is almost instantaneous. This day is turning point in Cory's life because it starts him steadily down the path toward alcoholism.





## **Part Three: Falling Down, Picking Myself Up: The Promised Land, Man in Motion, Wheels, Me and My Shadow: Chapters 36 - 44**

### **Part Three: Falling Down, Picking Myself Up: The Promised Land, Man in Motion, Wheels, Me and My Shadow: Chapters 36 - 44 Summary**

Despite his anxiety and fears, Cory decides to join the high school football team. By some strange twist of fate, Cory's illness actually help him on the field: the extra energy in his muscles makes him the second fastest player on the team, and the weight he's gained from his medications help him in tackles. Cory is a star on the football team, and his parents are deeply proud of his accomplishments. When they get a new coach halfway through the season, however, things change. This coach isn't willing to make exceptions for Cory's behaviors. He expects Cory to be on time for every practice and complete the same exercises as everyone else if he wants to play. Of course, this is impossible. After Cory is benched for being late to practice due to his tics, Cory's temper explodes and he's sent off for the entire game. In a fit, Cory storms away from his team. He never plays high school sports again.

Cory's tics get so bad that one morning, as soon as he rises from bed, a tic throws him on the floor. Whenever he tries to stand up, the tic hurls him back to the ground. After his football mishap, Cory's tics escalate and he begins throwing himself out of bed every morning. It's becoming increasingly difficult for Cory to walk without hurling himself to the ground. Eventually, he's forced to use a wheelchair. When Cory makes it clear that he absolutely will NOT use a wheelchair at school, and if he is forced to take one he will break it, the school compromises: Cory can walk to and from classes, but he needs to have an escort with him. The school hires a man named Terry. At first, Terry and Cory really hit it off. Cory feels like he can confide in and trust Terry. The one thing Terry doesn't approve of is Cory's smoking habit, particularly because Cory claims his OCD forces him to smoke cigarettes even if he doesn't want them. Because smoking is against school policy, when Terry gets fed up, he turns Cory in to the principal, earning Cory a suspension. Cory is outraged by the seeming break in trust and writes a horrifically threatening email to Terry. Terry turns the email in to school staff, who view it as a credible threat to personnel, and forward it to the local prosecutor. In addition to being suspended from school, Cory is now threatened with legal action. In the end, his case is dismissed, but it leaves his entire family shaken up.



## Part Three: Falling Down, Picking Myself Up: The Promised Land, Man in Motion, Wheels, Me and My Shadow: Chapters 36 - 44 Analysis

Cory's various conditions make it very hard for him to keep friends. When he was young, his classmates were mostly afraid of him, as if his conditions were contagious. As he ages, however, the kids begin to use his conditions against him, taking advantage of his vulnerabilities. In school, Cory is constantly aware of the stares and giggles. His desire to fit in adds to his anxiety, which compounds his tics, exacerbating his desire to fit in, etc, in a vicious cycle. The only people Cory feels like he truly fits in with are the drinkers.

In this section, Cory's bad attitude begins to appear. He's prone to temper tantrums and often expects preferential treatment. These characteristics make him a somewhat unlikable narrator. Throughout the novel, Cory has been portrayed as a hero with fierce determination to embrace life despite his many obstacles. In truth, he's a bit of a brat. After falling out with his football coach, Cory quits the team and never plays high school sports again. After a fight with his school escort, Cory sends a vicious, attacking email. But Cory is not a literary character; he is a real person, and on some level these reactions are understandable. Unfortunately, the narration never reflects back on the negative reactions and it seems that Cory hasn't learned any life lessons from losing his temper. In fact, when reconsidering the fight with Terry, Cory says, "By now, I guess I should be putting the incident behind me and trying to see Terry's side of the story, but I can't. Even though I acted like an idiot, I still think the wrong person apologized" (Page 159). There's something unsettling about this reaction: it portrays Cory as spoiled and selfish, unable to see conflict through another's eyes. For his entire life, everyone - family, friends, teachers, doctors, administration, etc - has fought to see the world through Cory's eyes and has adjusted everything from their lifestyles to outlooks based on his experiences. People have made so many accommodations for Cory's conditions that he now expects them. Expectation and entitlement are two unsavory characteristics in a human. While this section seeks to highlight the difficult world Cory must navigate, it also highlights some of Cory's character flaws, portraying him in a negative light that never fully disappears. As a result, some readers may feel a distance forming and they may no longer be rooting for Cory's success with the same vigor of earlier sections.



## **Part Three: Falling Down, Picking Myself Up: The Slippery Slope, Once Again, Friends in Need, Party Animals, Flying, End of the Line, Rock Bottom: Chapters 45 - 53**

### **Part Three: Falling Down, Picking Myself Up: The Slippery Slope, Once Again, Friends in Need, Party Animals, Flying, End of the Line, Rock Bottom: Chapters 45 - 53 Summary**

Throughout high school, Cory continues to take a wide variety of drugs, prescribed by doctors from all over the United States. Unfortunately, none of these prescriptions seem to help. The only drug that gives Cory any sense of peace is alcohol. Two of Cory's friends, Mingo and Drew, come over regularly on the weekends to party. Often, they bring girls with them and they all get drunk together. Even though Cory's parents don't approve of what's going on, they want their son to have a social life. They know that if they forbid him to party on the weekends, they'll only exasperate his depression and anxiety. During this particular part, Mingo and Cory get into a huge fight about a girl and Mingo threatens to pound Cory. The two punch and wrestle for a few minutes in the basement before Drew, who is much smaller than both of them, breaks it up.

Soon after, Cory drinks an entire bottle of vodka while lying on the basement couch. He's depressed thinking about how different his life is from the average teenagers. He hates that he has to take so many drugs and that none of them seem to work. He drinks until he passes out with a cigarette in his hand. When he wakes, the entire couch is on fire. It's a miracle that he isn't injured, but it's clear the fire is spreading. Cory manages to carry the burning cushions outside and quench the fire with snow. He has almost killed himself and his entire family who sleep upstairs. Cory knows that this is the turning point in his life: he needs to take control of himself again.



## **Part Three: Falling Down, Picking Myself Up: The Slippery Slope, Once Again, Friends in Need, Party Animals, Flying, End of the Line, Rock Bottom: Chapters 45 - 53 Analysis**

One reason why Cory may be acting out in entitlement and selfishness is due to the Friedmans' parenting style. In their constant quest to help Cory, they may have lost their way. They treat their son with different expectations that they treat their daughter, which allows for Cory's bad behaviors. Because Cory has no friends at school, they allow him to hang out with young drinkers and drug abusers simply so he can socialize. They turn a blind eye to the bad behaviors - which include drinking, smoking indoors, and obvious sexual activity - which only fuels Cory's bad behaviors. With his parents enabling his addictions, it's no wonder that they careen totally out of control. While most readers will be shocked by the Friedmans' parenting style, their lax attitudes are understandable. They're overwhelmed, exhausted, and frustrated. Both parents dedicate so much energy to Cory's medical conditions that certain bad behaviors are ignored simply because the parents don't have any energy left to combat them. To his credit, when Hal Friedman hears the fight downstairs, he intervenes. After spotting a teenager passed out in the corner, he finally says enough is enough. Although he doesn't call the cops or forbid Cory from spending time with these "friends" anymore, he drives the drunken kid home and tells Cory he should be ashamed of his behavior. While the punishment (if it can even be called that) is light, at least Hal has acknowledged that something is wrong. It's strange that he doesn't take the alcohol away from Cory, who is only seventeen. This may be because alcohol actually helps control Cory's tics and everyone, including his father, is desperate for some relief.



## **Part Four: The Intervention: Into the Wild: Chapters 54 - 61**

### **Part Four: The Intervention: Into the Wild: Chapters 54 - 61 Summary**

After leaving Dressler Psychiatric Hospital against medical orders, Cory is enrolled in the Roundtop Wilderness Camp for troubled teens. Here, Cory must climb a Wyoming mountain in the middle of winter, following strict orders and regulations, to prove that he has control over his life and emotions. The program will also force him to rehabilitate his alcoholism, as there is no contact with the outside world allowed. The counselors promise that, "we're here to help you fix your lives, but in the end it's going to be you who have to do it" (p. 198). Cory wakes each morning with two feet of snow covering his sleeping bag. He scrapes ice from his boots before he can wear them. He is taught how to build shelter, how to ration food, and how to purify melted snow into drinking water. The idea is that troubled kids will have to deal with immediate issues (warmth, food, water, shelter) rather than focusing on their larger problems. Each student stays with the program until the counselors feel they are ready to go home - no sooner, no later.

Initially, Cory struggles in the program. His anxiety threatens to get the better of him. With no contact to home, Cory is sure something terrible has happened to his parents. He becomes obsessed with the idea that they've been in a plane or car crash. He demands to be sent home, or at the very least, be given a phone call. The counselors refuse: contact with the outside world is strictly forbidden. When Cory begs to know if his parents are dead, one counselor shrugs and says, "It's possible, but I don't know" (p. 204). Rather than escalate Cory's anxiety, this response is somehow calming. He recognizes that he has two choices. He can throw himself on the ground and give in to his anxiety, or he can fight. Cory chooses to fight, to survive. As the program progresses, Cory makes great strides in his confidence, albeit much more slowly than the other students. He builds a backpack from tree branches, cooks food, climbs a mountain. He is exhausted, homesick, and freezing, but he's never felt stronger. When they reach the end of the climb, Cory is the only student to graduate. After weeks on the mountain, Cory is going home, and for the first time in his life, he feels in control of his body.

### **Part Four: The Intervention: Into the Wild: Chapters 54 - 61 Analysis**

After Cory nearly burns the house down, his parents realize that some action must be taken. Cory's bad behaviors are now putting everyone's life in jeopardy. Rather than commit him to an addictions program, they send him on a wilderness retreat in the Wyoming Mountains. The program is short and sweet. For the first time in his life, Cory



is treated with the same expectations and rules as everyone around him. The counselors refuse to make accommodations for Cory's conditions and demand that he rely on his body the same way the other students must rely on theirs. In this way, Cory is forced out of his role as the perpetual victim. He must embrace his strengths and fight for equality, not expect it to be handed to him. As expected, he struggles to keep up with his able bodied peers. Each student is asked to make a backpack from scratch. This project takes most students a day or two to complete, but it takes Cory nearly two weeks. He is held to the same strict regime and schedule as the other students and often misses meals because he fails to meet requirements. Because he knows complaining will get him nowhere, Cory is forced to face the effect of his actions: "I have only two choices: throw myself on the ground and give up...or fight off the bad thoughts as best I can and do what I have to do to survive" (p. 204). As a result, Cory begins to trust in his body. Keen readers will remember the joy Cory felt climbing the tree in chapter 18. Relying on his body despite its tics gives Cory a huge sense of normalcy and accomplishment. His anxiety minimizes and therefore his tics are more manageable. These two elements: holding Cory to the same expectations as his peers and encouraging him to embrace his body rather than fight against it, are the keys to his freedom.



## **Part Four: The Intervention: Leap of Faith, Stumble: Chapters 62 - 67**

### **Part Four: The Intervention: Leap of Faith, Stumble: Chapters 62 - 67 Summary**

After graduating from Roundtop Wilderness Retreat, Cory is sent to the adolescent OCD ward at the Wellington Neurological Center in London, England. Here, Cory is treated for his OCD with a variety of new methods, including using music to relax the brain. Cory meets many interesting patients who suffer from conditions similar to his own, which unlocks a new sensitivity he hadn't felt before. What is most interesting about the treatment here is that Cory is encouraged to embrace his tics in the hopes that one day he can control them, rather than simply trying to suppress them, which can actually make them worse. Six weeks into his therapy, Cory is cleared to return home. The Friedmans arrive to pick Cory up and inform him that he'll have two days at home - with strictly no contact with his old "friends" - before being sent to a therapeutic boarding school in New Hampshire. Cory is outraged by this decision and feels as if his parents are punishing him at a time when he feels he is finally gaining control of his life. His parents fear that he's missed too much school and they hope Devorough Boarding School will help him catch up. Three weeks into his time at Devorough, Cory feels as if he's going to have a mental breakdown. The academic pressures are simply too high and he hates the strict behavioral guidelines. During a rare phone call home, Cory speaks to Mingo who explains that now that Cory is seventeen-years-old, he's legally an adult and can leave Devorough any time he'd like. A few days later, Cory escapes. His planning is poor and he soon finds himself lost in the middle of the woods. A police officer finds him sometime later and returns him to his parents, who allow him to drop out of school.

### **Part Four: The Intervention: Leap of Faith, Stumble: Chapters 62 - 67 Analysis**

Continuing the therapy of the wilderness retreat, doctors at the Wellington Neurological Center also encourage Cory to embrace his tics rather than suppress them. His doctors believe that anxiety is at the root of all his tics and compulsive behaviors, so their main mission is to help Cory relax. Once he relaxes, he's able to feel the tics coming. Once he recognizes the warning signs he can channel the energy other ways. If he tics, it's not considered a failure. He is taught to embrace the tic and in doing so, minimizes its effects. Previously, when he fought to suppress the tics, they became more aggressive and frequent causing a vicious cycle of anxiety and violent ticcing. This new therapy completely changes the way Cory views his conditions and provide the perfect opportunity for his success. Additionally, Cory is placed in residential treatment with other patients suffering from OCD and Tourette's. Despite his many treatments and



hospitalizations, this is the first time Cory spends any length of time with fellow Tourette's patients. In this atmosphere, his behaviors aren't strange or frightening. They're normal. Within this safe environment, Cory is free to fully embrace his therapies.

Despite the progress he's made in the past few months, the lure of bad behavior still beckons. Cory is painfully behind in school but rather than embrace the opportunity to play academic catch-up at Devorough Boarding School, one of the best schools in the country, Cory would rather drink with his old friends. This shows that despite his progress, both physical and emotional, Cory is still selfish, immature, and impulsive. Although his parents have made great strides setting up appropriate boundaries for Cory's behaviors, they still allow him to drop out of school without consequence.





# **Part Four: The Intervention: The Emergency Meeting, Miracle Days, A Father's Epilogue**

## **Part Four: The Intervention: The Emergency Meeting, Miracle Days, A Father's Epilogue Summary**

After allowing Cory to leave Devorough Boarding School, Cory's parents focus on getting him back into his old high school. He should be a senior, graduating this year, but unfortunately, the school doesn't see it this way. They call an emergency meeting to say that Cory must repeat his junior year. When she hears this, Cory's mom is devastated. She fears that if Cory is forced to repeat a year of school it will be sending the message that progress isn't possible. After all the work Cory has done, she feels it is desperately important that he be given a fresh start. She convinces the school that all the work Cory did on the mountain and at Devorough School should count as credit. She cites all his success online, the small businesses he started, the classes he's taken during his sick leaves. She hands out a stack of assignments Cory finished but had been unable to turn in due to absences. She calls climbing a mountain, losing sixty pounds, and quitting smoking examples of physical education. She begs the board to reconsider and in the end, they do. Cory is allowed to enter his senior year of high school as long as he passes the midterms and examinations required to complete his junior year. He studies hard and passes with flying colors.

Only a few weeks later, Cory leaves school one afternoon with a strange sensation. Something feels different, but he can't decide what it is. Suddenly, he realizes that he's gone the entire day without ticcing. Sure he's mistaken, Cory goes about his afternoon routine waiting for the tics to start. He even tries to encourage them by going through the motions, wondering if they will elicit involuntary movements, but they don't. The feeling lasts through the night and the entire next day. Not a single twitch, jerk, hop, or vocalization. Overwhelmed, Cory climbs onto his motorbike and speeds away. He feels the breeze against his skin and knows for the first time in his life, he's free.

## **Part Four: The Intervention: The Emergency Meeting, Miracle Days, A Father's Epilogue Analysis**

In the final section of the novel, Cory returns to his normal life at home. The first hurdle he must overcome is with returning to school. Cory has missed so many classes, skipped so many tests, and forgotten so many assignments that they feel it wouldn't be fair to pass him. Sophie Freidman's reaction may split readers: some will feel that Cory deserves to repeat his junior year of high school. If he hasn't done the work he shouldn't be allowed to proceed. Passing him reinforces the message that he deserves special



treatment. Other readers will see things from Sophie's point of view: Cory has worked hard in the past few months and forcing him to repeat junior year sends the message that his hard work was for naught: "Going backward will only make him revert to where he was when he had to ... take a leave of absence" (Page 240). No matter what obstacles Cory is faced with, he knows he has the emotional support of his parents, who will neither leave nor forsake him. When faced with the some of the most difficult decisions any parent can make about their child, Hal and Sophie Friedman showcase truly unconditional love, proving that familial love is stronger than the most powerful medications.

At the end of the novel, Cory is seemingly free of Tourette's, OCD and anxiety. In the Father's Epilogue at the end of the novel, Hal Friedman admits that this isn't totally the case: "As of this writing, some of Cory's physical symptoms still return, but they are nowhere near as severe as they used to be. He is on very little medicine, and he's not taking anything that coincided with a worsening of his symptoms in the past" (p. 268). After struggling for many years with doctors and medications, the Friedmans realize that many of Cory's negative behaviors were brought on by the medications themselves. While there is still no cure for Tourette's or OCD, Cory's story sends a message of self-acceptance. Once Cory learns to love himself, flaws and all, the relationships around him begin to improve. This beautiful journey sends the message to all readers to love and accept themselves.



# Characters

## Cory Friedman

Cory Friedman is the narrator of *Med Head*, which tells the story of his life from the age of 5 to 17 as he battles against the effects of Tourette's Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. One morning, he wakes with "an unusual, intense tension building up in my neck, and I think the only way to relieve it is to jerk my head to one side" (Page 19). Cory jerks his neck, but a few moments later, the tension returns. This happens throughout the day, and soon, Cory is jerking his neck every few seconds. He tries to stop but the longer he holds back, the stronger the urge becomes. This is Cory's first tic. After being misdiagnosed with ADHD and prescribed Ritalin, Cory's tics increase and fully take over his life. He has verbal, physical, and behavioral tics ranging from hopping when he walks, to grunting and swearing, to hurling himself on the floor causing great physical damage. Nearly all of Cory's young life is spent in doctor's offices, hospitals, or in the throngs of side effects from his many drugs. He is anxious, suffers from vertigo, and has few friends. As his condition worsens, Cory fears that his behavioral disorders are pulling his family apart. When he is sixteen-years-old, Cory discovers that alcohol subdues some of his tics, and within a few months, he is a fully-fledged alcoholic. After nearly burning his house down in an alcohol-related stupor, Cory's parents stage an intervention and send him off to a wilderness retreat. There, Cory learns to trust and not loathe his body. When he returns home, he is a changed man. It's unclear whether this newfound freedom is a result of medication, outgrowing his condition, or new forms of therapy, but in some way, the answer to that question doesn't matter. After thirteen years of suffering, Cory Friedman is finally free.

## Hal and Sophie Friedman

Hal and Sophie Friedman are Cory's parents. When Cory was young, Hal worked fulltime as a writer, and Sophie owned a business, which she closed down after Cory was diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome. Throughout Cory's life, his parents are a constant support system, never blaming Cory for his strange behaviors and actions. For example, Sophie doesn't blame Cory when he grabs the steering wheel of the car she's driving, causing an accident. Hal doesn't blame Cory when he spits chewed up food in his face, gets expelled from school, or nearly burns the house down. At times, Hal and Sophie appear to enable Cory's bad behavior, by letting him hang out with a "bad crowd" of kids, for example. To their credit, Hal and Sophie have very little guidelines or examples to follow. Every decision they make about Cory's treatment is a first because there are few cases as severe as Cory's. At times, the decisions they make are against medical orders because they believe they know their son better than any doctor could, and often, they are right. The best decision the parents make seems to be the decision to remove Cory from Dressler Psychiatric Hospital. Instead of committing him to an institution, they send him on a wilderness retreat which teaches him to rely on his body rather than loathe it. Throughout Cory's treatment, Sophie keeps painstaking notes



about his medications and side effects. Whenever Cory needs someone to back his corner, his mother is there with guns blazing. Similarly, Hal fights for his son while managing to show him a constant stream of affection. When faced with the some of the most difficult decisions any parent can make about their child, Hal and Sophie Friedman showcase truly unconditional love.

## Jessie Friedman

Jessie Friedman is Cory's older sister, although she is only seven-months older than him. The Friedmans adopted Jessie after fearing that they were unable to conceive children naturally. The same month that Jessie's adoption was approved, Sophie Friedman discovered she was pregnant. Cory and Jessie are raised almost as twins and grew very close. When Cory is diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome, Jessie begins to pull away from her brother. As a teenager, she seems embarrassed by Cory's constant ticcing. After Cory successfully completes his wilderness retreat, the two repair their relationship and go back to being best friends.

## Dr. Laufton

Dr. Laufton is the first doctor Cory sees when he begins to exhibit strange behavior. Dr. Laufton misdiagnoses Cory as having ADHD and prescribes him Ritalin, which only exacerbates his problems.

## Dr. Holmes

Dr. Holmes is the leading research doctor for Tourette's Syndrome at Stringer Hospital for Neurological Movement Disorders. She is a brisk, all-business woman more interested in Cory's tics than him as a patient. Dr. Holmes prescribes tetrabenazine to treat Cory's condition, which sends him into a psychotic state of frenzy. Although it's clear that Dr. Holmes is experimenting with Cory, his family is too afraid to sue her malpractice. Even though she's endangered Cory's life, they family fears that someday she may be able to help him, and they don't want to burn their bridges.

## Terry

Terry is the escort assigned to Cory's case by his high school. Terry's main jobs include taking Cory from class to class, ensuring that he doesn't hurt himself in the hallways, taking notes during lectures, and serving as a liaison between Cory and his support staff. Initially, Terry and Cory get on well, but Terry is annoyed by Cory's constant smoking, particularly because it goes against school policy. One afternoon, Terry turns Cory in to the administrative staff, earning Cory a suspension. Cory is so outraged he sends a threatening email, which Cory forwards to the local prosecutor's office. In addition to his suspension, Cory is now faced with legal action.



## Sarah

Sarah is the girl Cory has a crush on in high school. When they first met, Sarah was thin and beautiful, but as time passed, drugs and alcohol abuse ravaged Sarah's body. Now, she takes anything she can get her hands on to get high. She's stolen Xanax from Cory in the past, but he still feels sorry for her.

## Mingo

Mingo is Cory's best friend in high school. Physically, Mingo is massive, towering over Cory and overpowering him by nearly 70 pounds. Some days, Mingo acts like a brother to Cory and other times, like a bully. Mingo's main concern in life is where he's going to get his next drink, and he drinks often. When Cory is admitted into Devorough, Mingo convinces him that he can runaway since he's 17-years-old and doesn't have to live under his parents' rule.



# Objects/Places

## Dressler Psychiatric Hospital

Dressler Psychiatric Hospital is the mental hospital Cory's parents take him to in the opening chapters of the novel. They hope the hospital can help him with his alcohol abuse, but it immediately becomes clear that the other patients will ostracize Cory if he stays. The hospital itself looks like an asylum: the walls are white and there are no windows. There is hardly any light. The entire building, including the ceilings, is covered in metal grating, like a giant cage.

## Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette's Syndrome is a medical condition that causes the neurons in the brain to misfire causing uncontrollable actions - either physical or vocal - known as tics. Cory's first symptom of Tourette's Syndrome appeared when he was five years old. From then until the age of sixteen, Cory suffered from a wide range of symptoms.

## Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a medical condition that causes patients to fixate on certain ideas or behaviors. Cory exhibits many strange obsessions throughout *Med Head*, from the desire to burn his nose with the cigarette lighter in the car, to touching his nose while playing baseball, to jerking the steering wheel when others are driving. Each action is uncontrollable and causes extreme anxiety if subdued.

## Tics

Tics are uncontrollable urges that overtake someone's body when they suffer from Tourette's Syndrome. Tics feel like a tension in the body that can only be relieved through a specific movement, sound, or gesture. Cory suffers from a wide variety of tics, from jerking his neck, grunting, flipping his middle finger, hopping on one foot, and many more.

## Waxing and Waning

Waxing and Waning is a medical term used to describe the highs and lows of Cory's tics. Because he is on a constant supply of new medications and dosages, his tics experience a strange cycle of regularity. Some weeks his tics are out of control. The next week, they may be manageable. No matter how good a week appears, the next week the tics return, sometimes with a vengeance. Doctors try a dizzying cocktail of medications but can't seem to find the dosage to cure Cory's suffering.



## The Resource Room

The Resource Room is a special room in Cory's school where children with learning disabilities are sent for special tutoring. Cory is often sent to the resource room even though he doesn't have any special learning needs. This frustrates Cory because, despite his many tics, he has some of the best grades in school. In truth, his teachers often send him to the resource room to give themselves a break from his annoying distractions.

## Baseball

Baseball is Cory's favorite sport, and the one sport he excels at despite his tics. In middle school, Cory pitches for his school team, leading them to victory despite cruel taunts and provocation from the opposing team.

## Lake Wallenpuapack

Lake Wallenpuapack is the lake where Cory's father takes him jet skiing after his huge baseball win. Cory's father makes a special effort to bond with his son, particularly because Cory doesn't have many friends at school. During this jet-skiing trip, Cory realizes his exhausting his condition must be for his parents and he feels an overwhelming sense of gratitude for their love.

## Alcohol

Alcohol is Cory's drug of choice. After being forced to take a dizzying array of medications as a child, Cory finds that the only thing that calms his tics is alcohol. Drinking alcohol also makes him "cooler" in school and he makes friends by purchasing bottles of vodka to pass around at parties. Unfortunately, Cory isn't able to regulate his drinking and he soon becomes a fully-fledged alcoholic.

## Wilderness Retreat

Wilderness Retreat is where Cory's parents send him to combat his alcoholism. After deciding that Dressler Psychiatric Hospital is too frightening a place for their son's rehabilitation, the Friedmans decide to send Cory up a mountain in the middle of winter as therapy. Their choice pays off. During his excruciating struggle up the mountain, Cory learns to trust his body for the first time in his life.

## Devorough

Devorough is the boarding school Cory is sent to after returning from his wilderness retreat. Even though Devorough is a fantastic school that offers Cory many

opportunities to get ahead in his studies, he's desperate to return home to his friends and family, and he runs away.





# Themes

## Overmedication

There are many reasons why critics of today's pharmaceutical practices believe America's children are overmedicated. Most of these issues aren't directly addressed in *Med Head* but it's clear that Cory Friedman is overmedicated for his conditions. On the array of medications doctors prescribe, Cory's side effects range from hyperactivity to nearly comatose states of vacancy. Perhaps the most harrowing example of Cory's overmedication occurs when the high profile doctor in New York, Dr. Holmes, prescribes tetrabenazine to treat his tics. It's a powerful drug normally used to treat schizophrenia, but isn't usually legal to prescribe in the United States. Immediately, it's clear that Dr. Holmes is more interested in her research, and getting tetrabenazine approved in America, than she is in Cory as a patient: "I turn back to the far wall and try not to think about it. I tell myself that they've seen so many other lab rats they've forgotten rats have feelings, too" (Page 103). The side effects of this drug on Cory's system are horrifying. Cory feels as if he's possessed; he's unable to sleep at night because his limbs won't stop bouncing around in bed. The drug affects him on a cellular level, so even his blood feels like fire ants rushing through his system. Despite these horrific effects, Dr. Holmes ups his dosage again and again until Cory begs for someone to kill him. He is completely out of his mind, even suicidal. Sadistically, it seems as if Dr. Holmes doesn't care about Cory's reaction, she simply wants to know what will happen to a person on such a high dosage of tetrabenazine. In this case, Cory is overmedicated for her personal research, not for his own treatment. Because so little is known about Tourette's Syndrome and the ways to treat it, many of Cory's doctors were prescribing medications just to see what happened. On some level, this experimentation is necessary to discover a cure, but the widespread practice of overmedicating children can have disastrous results.

## Acceptance

One of the greatest struggles Cory has in *Med Head* is his struggle for acceptance, both socially and within himself. In the outside world, Cory is ostracized for his strange behaviors and distracting tics. As a young child, classmates shirk away from him as if his conditions are contagious. As he grows up, classmates become more manipulative, using Cory's Tourette's against him - inviting him over and then stealing his bike, for example, or taking advantage of the drugs and alcohol he has on hand for treatment. In his family life, Cory has always been close to his sister, Jessie. As children, the two are best friends, but as Jessie grows up, she becomes embarrassed of Cory's strange behaviors and spends more time out of the home. These conflicts in relationships cause Cory to second-guess his self worth. Initially, Cory can recognize that the problem lies with others: they see him as a freak because they're uneducated. The more Cory comes in contact with this reaction, however, the more he begins to question if they're right: is he a freak? Cory struggles to accept himself because he has no control over his body -



neither physically nor mentally. He can't control his actions, emotions, or thoughts. He feels like a prisoner in his own body and he has no idea what he's done to deserve this. Cory's feelings of loneliness and self-pity are only perpetuated by his alcoholism and violent outbursts. After being sent to the wilderness retreat, however, Cory is forced to trust his body rather than loathe it. He is treated as an equal in the camp, not given any special favors because of his condition. As a result, Cory returns home a changed man. He has found acceptance in the mountains and soon, lives a life free of debilitating tics. Once Cory learns to love himself, flaws and all, the relationships around him begin to improve. This beautiful journey sends the message to all readers to love and accept themselves.

## Family Strength

Perhaps the strongest theme in the novel is the theme of family love and strength. Cory's struggles with Tourette's Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder were not his struggles alone. They affected his entire family, and the Friedmans were forced to band together to overcome the obstacles in their lives. When Cory is young, his father Hal works fulltime as a writer and his mother Sophie owns a business. After Cory's diagnosis, Sophie quits her job to focus fulltime on Cory's doctor visits and medications. Throughout Cory's life, his parents are a constant support system, never blaming Cory for his strange behaviors and actions. For example, Sophie doesn't blame Cory when he grabs the steering wheel of the car she's driving, causing an accident. Hal doesn't blame Cory when he spits chewed up food in his face, gets expelled from school, or nearly burns the house down. At times, Hal and Sophie appear to enable Cory's bad behavior, by letting him hang out with a "bad crowd" of kids, for example. To their credit, Hal and Sophie have very little guidelines or examples to follow. At times, the decisions they make are against medical orders because they believe they know their son better than any doctor could, and often, they are right. While Cory fears that his medication conditions will tear his family apart, it actually bonds them closer together. No matter what physical obstacles Cory is faced with, he knows he has the emotional support of his parents, who will neither leave nor forsake him. When faced with the some of the most difficult decisions any parent can make about their child, Hal and Sophie Friedman showcase truly unconditional love, proving that familial love is stronger than the most powerful medications.



# Style

## Point of View

Med Head is told in first-person and limited omniscient narration through Cory Friedman's perspective. This means that Cory speaks using "me" and "I" and that the only person whose thoughts the reader has access to are Cory's alone. The reader is held very close to Cory's emotions because these are the most important aspects to understanding the novel, which follows Cory's journey as he struggles with a variety of behavioral disorders (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Tourette's Syndrome, and Anxiety Disorder). The point-of-view narration is completely reliable as Cory struggles to understand what is happening in his brain and body.

His confusion provides the perfect opportunity for the reader's questions - particularly about medical terminology - to be answered. Whenever a question may arise, Cory often asks the same question simultaneously.

It is interesting to note that even though this is a true story narrated from Cory Friedman's point-of-view, Cory did not write the book himself. His father did, with the help of famed suspense author James Patterson. In the prologue to Med Head, Hal Friedman, Cory's father, writes, "[James Patterson and I] decided, with Cory's blessing, to tell his story in his own voice, because this conveys most powerfully what it was like for Cory to live through these experiences ... The extremely unusual events portrayed in this story have been reconstructed from Cory's own accounts, from detailed medical diaries that were kept by his mother throughout the period, and from direct family observations. Cory confirms that this narrative presents an accurate portrayal of his life story" (p. xv).

## Setting

Med Head is set in New York state from the late 1990's to early 2000's. The majority of the novel is set in a variety of hospitals and doctor's offices across the country. To battle his debilitating medical conditions, Cory Friedman and his family travel across the United States and back again in search of a cure. From the age of five to sixteen, Cory rarely goes a few weeks without visiting the doctor to adjust his medications. In the novel, each of these offices blends together with the same white walls, the same tiled floors, the same sterile work surfaces. Doctor's names are forgotten, medications are listed like shopping lists. Although it's confusing and somewhat alienating for the reader, this medical setting highlights the dizzying array of office visits that peppered Cory's young life. When Cory isn't visiting with a doctor, he's either in school or at home, in front of his computer. In school, Cory has few friends and is often alienated by his teachers as well. At home, Cory is lonely, his only friends are his parents and sister. As a result, the novel spends a lot of time describing what it is like to be trapped in Cory's body. The narration creates a strong sense of empathy to Cory's physical condition as



the reader experiences every tic, twitch, and jerk alongside him. Because of the intimate first-person narration, at times it seems as if the novel is set in Cory's head, not a physical location. The outside world is filtered through Cory's thoughts and his relationship with his Tourette's. The world around him appears grotesque, distorted, or unrecognizable. This sets the tone for the entire novel, in which Cory feels like a monster in his own head and in the outside world.

## Language and Meaning

Med Head is written specifically for young readers and is aimed at middle / high school students. Authors Hal Friedman and James Patterson previously published a book about Cory's complex medical history entitled *Against Medical Orders*, which was aimed at an adult audience. The language of Med Head, therefore, is purposefully conversation and easy to follow. When Corey's father approached him with the idea of publishing a book in his own voice, Corey reportedly nodded and said, "If it will help other people like me, yes" (p. xv). Through the language of the book, it's clear that the Friedman's didn't only want to reach other kids suffering from OCD or Tourette's Syndrome. They wanted to change the way society as a whole views people with these disorders. One of Cory's main hurdles to overcome was his social life in school. His tics made him an outcast. By writing a book about these struggles in a conversation tone aimed toward middle school readers, the Friedman's hope to bring awareness to schools. Having OCD or Tourette's Syndrome doesn't make someone crazy. It makes them different. Med Head's narration gives readers an unprecedented and intimate glimpse into the life of an overmedicated patient. Cory's voice is honest, intelligent, and bold: he refuses to shy away from embarrassing or unsettling thoughts and as a result, his language shines through and provides a complex characterization of his struggles. The only time language may be a hurdle for middle school aged readers is in the long passages describing his various medications. Each medication is explained in detail - it's dosage and side effects. While this is a fascinating display of overmedication in America, some readers might find the long lists boring. In a way, this may be Friedman's point: the list of medications seemed never ending in real life, too.

## Structure

Med Head is divided into four sections: A Lost Childhood, Onward and Downward, Falling Down, Picking Myself Up, and The Intervention. Roughly speaking, each section deals with a major event in Cory's life. The first section, A Lost Childhood, discusses the onset of Cory's conditions and the fear his family feels at his diagnoses. The theme of "lost childhoods" is showcased in the constant stream of pills Cory takes that meddle with his mood, memory, and ability to interact. Onward and Downward showcases the way Cory's illnesses affect his everyday life, from this family relationships to his school work, highlighting the way being different affects his self esteem. Falling Down, Picking Myself Up deals with Cory in high school. As a teenager, Cory's behaviors become more erratic and there are greater consequences to his actions. In this section, Cory's addiction to alcohol is also addressed. In the final section, The Intervention, Cory's



parents finally intervene to stop Cory's negative behaviors. They stage an intervention by sending Cory to the mountains for a wilderness retreat. Here, Cory learns to trust his body rather than despise it. He learns coping skills and techniques for suppressing his tics. When he returns home, he is a changed man.

Within each of the four sections are smaller titled sections and even shorter chapters. Each small section has a name that refers to some action or event within the novel that foreshadows what the reader is about to read. Some small sections consist of only one chapter, while others contain more. There is no set system for sections. Throughout the novel, the chapters tend to be short and full of action, averaging 2 pages, which propels the reader through the novel. These short bursts highlight the jerks and changes of Cory's behaviors. Since Cory can rarely sit for long periods of time without change, it makes sense to reflect this fragmented existence in the narration.



## Quotes

"Going insane is probably my worst fear. If it happens, I won't know what - or where, reality is. To me, that's the ultimate isolation - to be separated from my own mind" (p. 6).

"Inside, I'm feeling so bad that I let Mrs. Wilkens down when she trusted me at the blackboard. But I also realize for the first time that I can get kids to laugh with me instead of at me when I do something inappropriate. I can become the class clown" (p. 40).

"It's as if I have wires in my brain that light up at the thought of [climbing], but they're wired to the wrong places and don't allow the energy to turn off. So this isn't about being crazy. This is about bad wiring" (p. 63).

"Something inside me has changed and gotten really calm. I'm out here in a place I love, with the wind in my face, playing my favorite game in the world. This is tense, but I've been through a lot worse and come out alive. I can survive this, too" (p. 82).

"We're always early for these appointments. I guess that's because we're always so hopeful" (p. 97).

"I turn back to the far wall and try not to think about it. I tell myself that they've seen so many other lab rats they've forgotten rats have feelings, too" (p. 103).

"Dirt bikes and motorcycles have been an obsession of mind ever since I can remember. When I ride, I move in a way I can't anywhere else. It feeds my need for danger. I can see myself in the future, riding all the time, never having to worry about school or jobs or friends, never having to explain myself to anyone" (p. 179).

"If I go back home the way that I came, there's nothing in my old life to help me. So every time one of my tics makes me think of giving up, I tell myself that I'm not going to let it beat me" (p. 202).

"Things have always been harder for me, but that's never stopped me, and it never will" (p. 253).



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Cory's initial descent into the tics and compulsions that eventually overtake his life. Where did it all start? Who, if anyone, is to blame for exacerbating his medical problems? In the first few precarious months, do you think his parents, teachers, and doctors handled his situation well? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How did life with Tourette's Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder affect Cory's life at school? How did his classmates and teachers treat him? What special resources, if any, were set up to ensure Cory's success in school? Which of Cory's teachers handled his situation best? Which handled it worst? What does Cory's story tell you about the relationship between education and mental illness? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

As he grew up, Cory found that certain activities positively affected his tics and compulsions. Choose two positive activities Cory took part in and describe how they affected his condition. Why might this be? How did these positive activities eventually make way for his alcoholism? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Cory struggles from three major ailments: Tourette's Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and an Anxiety Disorder. First, describe the symptoms of each of these issues and describe how they affected Cory's life. In what way are these conditions intertwined? Which condition, in your opinion, would be the most difficult to live with? Why? Be sure to include examples from your text to help strengthen your arguments.

How did Cory's parents handle the variety of diagnoses that plagued their child? How did Cory's medical conditions affect each of their lives? In your opinion, did Cory's parents always do what was best for him? Why or why not? How did Cory's parents' decisions differ from his doctors' decisions? How did this affect Cory's recovery? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How did having Tourette's and OCD affect Cory's social life? How did Cory's friendships change from the time he was five-years-old to the time he was in high school? How did the taunts and bullying change as he aged? What was did Cory find to fight back socially? Who did he call his true friends? What does this tell you about Cory's emotional state? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What happened to Cory during his wilderness retreats in the mountain? What were his parents hoping he would accomplish during the mission? Was he successful? Why do you think the wilderness retreat had such a strong impact on Cory, both physically and mentally? How did this retreat help him in ways medication couldn't? Do you think this should be a standard form of therapy for all troubled teens? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.