

# **Mick Harte Was Here Study Guide**

**Mick Harte Was Here by Barbara Park**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Mick Harte Was Here Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Mick.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Sirens.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">The Serengeti Sucks.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Treasures.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Tap Dancing on God's Piano.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Getting a Grip.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Common Sense and Good Judgment.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Forever.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>

## Plot Summary

The novel *Mick Harte Was Here* by Barbara Park tells the story of a family that must come to terms with the death of one of its members in a bicycle accident. The story is told from the viewpoint of Mick Harte's sister, Phoebe. Phoebe tells the story of the aftermath of Mick's death in a way that is both sarcastically humorous and heart wrenching. At the conclusion of the novel, Phoebe uses a stick to carve into a fresh concrete sidewalk at her school the words "MICK HARTE WAS HERE." These words are Phoebe's lasting tribute to her beloved brother.

Phoebe begins her story by telling her readers that her brother is dead. She does not want to present a story in which the reader will get to like her brother, then learn at the end that he has died. Phoebe includes in her record the events of the day of Mick's accident. The siblings had a fight that morning and never reconciled their disagreement. Phoebe is in soccer practice when she hears the ambulance sirens coming to the school. When her coach tells her that the person for whom the ambulance was coming was Mick, Phoebe realizes she somehow already knows this.

Through the remainder of the novel, Phoebe outlines the journey of grieving that her family must travel after the death of Mick. The family experiences depression, separation, anger and then finally reconciliation and the beginnings of healing. It seems as if the family turns a corner when they attend Mick's memorial service together. Instead of being depressing, this service is full of laughter and funny tales about Mick's antics.

Perhaps the greatest thing that Phoebe does in her brother's honor is to participate in a bicycle safety assembly. At this assembly, Phoebe makes a dramatic statement about the dangers of not wearing a bicycle helmet. The reader learns at the end of the novel that if Mick had been wearing a helmet at the time of his accident, it probably would have saved his life.



# Mick

## Mick Summary

This book tells the story of the death of Phoebe's twelve-year-old brother, Mick. Mick was killed in a bicycle accident because he was not wearing his helmet. The book also details the way in which Mick's family deals with his death.

The initial chapter begins with a short description of Mick's accident. He hit a rock with his bicycle tire that caused the bike to skid into a truck. Mick's death was the result of a head injury. The narrator writes that the intention of the book is to tell about Mick. She next writes that Mick is not alive anymore.

Phoebe, Mick's older sister, begins Mick's story by telling that their parents were not planning on having another baby ten months after Phoebe was born. Mick loved the idea that he could outsmart his parents. He was also great at imitating voices. Phoebe can still remember Mick's voice.

In addition, Phoebe can remember all the details of the fight that she and her brother had the morning of his death. Their father is getting ready for work while their mother has already left. Because of their parents' need for order, the children have a schedule to follow to keep them from arguing in the mornings. This morning, however, the schedule did not work out well. Mick had gone to the kitchen to eat breakfast and Phoebe was still trying to locate the prize in the cereal box.

Mick takes the prize, which is a pirate tattoo, away from her. Phoebe notes she didn't really want the tattoo, but she didn't want Mick to have it either. Their father walks in to find Phoebe with Mick in a headlock. Mick pretends he is trying to get the tattoo from Phoebe so that his father can have it. After giving them a warning look, their father leaves the room. Mick continues to torment Phoebe about the tattoo until she pushes him up against the refrigerator and calls him a bad name.

Phoebe indicates their fight that morning was strange because she and her brother actually liked each other. She believes some of this deep affection might have come from the fact that the children were so close in age to one another. Phoebe remembers the first time they got into really serious trouble together. They had used a stick to carve the letters F-A-R-T in their parents' freshly poured cement driveway. Instead of confessing when their father asked about the cement, Mick swore that a monkey had carved the letters there.

## Mick Analysis

In this brief chapter, Phoebe gives much information about her brother, herself and their family. Mick is ten months younger than his sister. Although Phoebe was planned, Mick was a surprise. Phoebe believes that it was because she and Mick were so close in age



that they were so attached to one another. The way in which Phoebe writes about her argument with her brother the day of his death, it is obvious that she is still hurt by the way she treated him that day, and the way he treated her. These arguments were apparently not common between the two.

During the course of the first chapter, Phoebe shares that the book written four weeks after Mick's death. She also makes a point to tell that Mick is dead. She does not intend to make a surprise ending about Mick's death, she just wants to write about him. Notice also that Phoebe is careful to describe Mick's death as an accident. He was doing nothing to cause himself to get hurt. It was just a freak accident.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of this novel is the short, almost abrupt writing style. This style not only makes the point of the novel very clear, but also mimics Mick's death. The end of his life is like many of the sentences in the book, short and abrupt.

Notice also Phoebe's descriptions of her parents. She highlights the differences between she and Mick and their parents. While the parents were both chemistry majors in school and are now very methodical and precise, the children aren't this way. The parents, however, try to enforce their methodical ways onto the children by doing things such as setting up a schedule so that Mick and Phoebe won't be in the same room together in the mornings believing this will cause them to be less likely to fight with one another.



# Sirens

## Sirens Summary

Phoebe begins this chapter by noting that she walked to school the day of Mick's accident with her best friend Zoe Santos. Although Mick could ride his black and chrome bike to school without looking like a doofus, Phoebe didn't ride hers because it was pink and white.

Phoebe goes on to explain that it was very important to Mick that he not look like a doofus in public. Phoebe tells a story about when Mick first saw his christening gown. He is embarrassed that his mother would take him out in public in a lacy white gown that he equated with ladies sleepwear. For a long time Mick overcompensated for this embarrassment by refusing to wear anything but a black t-shirt with a motorcycle on the front and a pair of camouflage pants to church.

In the fourth grade, Phoebe writes that Mick had given up his t-shirt and camouflage pants in exchange for stylish clothes. Phoebe said that because Mick was so stylish, many girls had a crush on him. Zoe doesn't have a crush on Mick, but the two are close friends. When Mick rides past them on the way to school without speaking to either of them, Phoebe explains that Mick is not mad at Zoe, but rather at Phoebe. Zoe comforts Phoebe telling her that Mick will be done being angry by lunchtime.

At lunch, however, Mick asks Phoebe to ride his bike home from school. Phoebe can't because she has soccer practice and also many books to take home. Zoe has to take her science project home after school so she can't help Mick out either. Phoebe tells Mick he'll be okay riding his bike to his friend's house even though he isn't sure where it is. She then leaves without saying goodbye.

Phoebe is at soccer practice when she hears the sound of the coming ambulance. She is surprised and dismayed when she notices it stops near the school. Phoebe notices the school secretary run out of the school to Coach Brodie and tell him something. The coach then goes to Phoebe. When the coach tells Phoebe it is Mick that the ambulance has come for, she replies that she knows.

Phoebe remembers what happened next as if it weren't real, as if were part of a play. Phoebe remembers that she did not cry, but did notice strange things about the people around her. Zoe and her mother picked Phoebe up at school and took her to their house. Phoebe notices when Mrs. Santos turns the wrong direction out of the school parking lot and looks behind her. It is at this point that she sees the truck that Mick hit. She also sees Mick's bike lying in the gutter. Zoe tries to hug her but Phoebe pushes her away. She does not even want to be touched.

At Zoe's house there is a message from Phoebe's father asking them to keep Phoebe there until he came for her. Although Phoebe begs to be taken to the hospital, Mrs.



Santos will not back down. Mrs. Santos continues bringing Phoebe food until the spread reminds Phoebe of a feast intended for King Henry VIII. This reminds Phoebe of Mick since Mick had dressed up like King Henry for Halloween. In turn, Phoebe remembers last year when Mick dressed up like Thomas Crapper, the inventor of the flush toilet. When Phoebe shares this memory with Zoe, they both laugh.

## Sirens Analysis

This chapter outlines what happened not only physically but also emotionally on the day of Mick's accident. Phoebe begins by describing the fight that she and Mick had that morning and concludes with she and Zoe laughing about Mick dressing up as Thomas Crapper for Halloween.

Feelings of guilt begin to build in Phoebe before she is even sure that it is Mick who has been injured. When her coach tells her what has happened, Phoebe responds to him that she already knew that it Mick who had been hurt. Even before this, however, Phoebe writes that she cannot understand how her fellow teammates can go on running sprints even though an ambulance has stopped so close to their school.

Although Phoebe cannot help but remember humorous things that Mick did. She feels badly when she shares these things with Zoe and the two laugh about them. Phoebe shows signs of being in the first stage of grief, the stage of denial. She writes that while sitting in the principal's office, she feels as if what is going on around her is not real. Phoebe also remembers praying at first that it was not really Mick who was hurt in the accident. When she learns for sure that it was Mick, she prays to God again, ordering him to make Mick okay.



# The Serengeti Sucks

## The Serengeti Sucks Summary

When Phoebe's father comes to get her, he doesn't answer right away when Phoebe asks if Mick is okay. He finally tells her that Mick is dead. Once they reach their own dark house, Phoebe turns on all of the lights. When Phoebe goes to her father in the kitchen, he tells her he needs to go and check on her mother. As he walks down the hall, he pauses and starts to shut the door of Mick's room. Phoebe screams at him not to close the door. Her father breaks down into tears.

Phoebe stands in the hall even after her father has gone into her parent's bedroom. As she stands there she sees the pictures of Mick's dog Wocket hanging around the mirror in the bedroom. Wocket had been more of a friend to Mick than a pet. Mick had even taught the dog to untie shoelaces, open doors and wear a red cowboy hat.

Phoebe remembered that Wocket had developed bone cancer and had to be put to sleep after the family had owned her for nearly nine years. Mick had stayed with Wocket to the very end. It was not until later when he, by force of habit, went to feed Wocket and realized that she wasn't there that he threw up, and then spent the remainder of the day closed up in his bedroom.

Mick came to dinner that day wearing Wocket's hat. He told stories of his dog. Mick even collected up all the loose hair he could find and saved it in a plastic bag. After dinner that day Mick and Phoebe had looked through all the family photo albums for pictures of Wocket to place around Mick's mirror. In an effort to keep from forgetting her, Mick looked at the pictures and talked to the dog daily.

At this point, Phoebe switches back to the present and writes about the way in which her family handles Mick's death. They don't tell stories about him at the table, in fact, they don't even eat much. Even television seemed stupid to them at the time Phoebe writes. Phoebe and her father try to watch a documentary about the Serengeti together but soon get tired of watching animals fight with and kill each other. They turn the show off and go to bed at 8 p.m.

Phoebe's mom takes the pills that her doctor had given her to relax. As a result, she sleeps most of the time. Although Phoebe had thought making arrangements for Mick's funeral and burial would take up their time, these plans do not turn out to be as time consuming as she had thought. There were a lot of phone calls, however, and many people brought food to the house.

Phoebe notes that everyone who contacted them would at some point get around to talking about Mick's death being part of God's plan. She writes that at this point Phoebe would generally tell these people she had to go, or would even hang up on them if they





had called on the phone. At this point, Phoebe writes that she didn't feel as if God had their best interests in mind with his plan.

Phoebe ends the chapter by noting that the upside of grief and depression was the weight loss that often accompanied it. She notes that even though people brought food to their house, they didn't eat. Phoebe indicated that this weight loss was nature's way of making up for everything else that death brought along with it.

## **The Serengeti Sucks Analysis**

In this section, Phoebe writes about how she and her parents continue to try to deal with Mick's death. She draws a parallel between Mick's death and the death of the dog, Wocket. In a way, Phoebe has a better understanding of how Mick felt and why he acted the way that he did when this beloved pet had to be put to sleep. Unlike her brother, however, Phoebe does not feel up to looking through photo albums to see pictures of her brother. These pictures make her feel sick.

One characteristic of Phoebe's story is that it is written in her sarcastically humorous style. This style keeps the story from becoming too deep and depressing, as it could easily have become. However, Phoebe records what she sees through a teenager's eyes. She is not comforted by people telling her that Mick's death was part of God's plan. She is also amused by the fact that everyone who brings food to their house brings a dish that contains potatoes.

Phoebe also notes that she lost a pound or two during her process of grieving. She indicates that this is perhaps the only positive feature of grieving. She indicates that she and her family's lack of appetite was nature's way of allowing people to say that the grieving family looked like they had lost weight and looked good in their clothes and actually mean this compliment.



# Treasures

## Treasures Summary

Zoe calls Phoebe and tries to talk to her. The only real conversation they have is about the events of the day that a school psychologist comes to school to talk to students about Mick's death. Zoe talks about how much better everyone felt after they had talked about Mick and said his name out loud. Phoebe hangs up on Zoe. Phoebe writes that she does not want to feel better about Mick's death.

In order to keep herself from feeling any better, Phoebe stops by Mick's room on the way back to her room. She looks at the collection of items on Mick's shelves that he always referred to as his "treasures". She sees the cigar that Mick had named Helen. Phoebe also sees Mick's fly swatters and remembered that he had asked for them for Christmas one year. She laughs when she remembers these humorous memories of Mick. As she laughs, Phoebe gets chill bumps because she feels that somewhere Mick is laughing too.

Phoebe later meets her mother in the kitchen. She tries to talk to her mother about Mick. Instead of trying to help her daughter deal with her grief, however, Phoebe's mother runs out of the house. Phoebe runs after her mother and yells that Phoebe is hurting also. After she slams the door, Phoebe runs to the place on the street where Mick was killed. Phoebe reasons that she does this because she wants to be in the last place where Mick was. She notices that someone has placed a flower at the place where Mick was killed. Phoebe does not go home until after dark.

## Treasures Analysis

It is in this chapter of the book that Phoebe first feels Mick's presence with her. She has gone into Mick's room in an effort to keep herself from feeling better about Mick's death. However, when Phoebe begins to look at Mick's things, she remembers the funny things that Mick did in conjunction with these things. Phoebe laughs when she remembers the way that Mick had killed a fly with a flip-flop because he had forgotten his fly swatters. As she laughs, Phoebe gets chill bumps because she feels that Mick is laughing also.

When Phoebe tries to discuss her experience with her mother, her mother cannot stand to discuss Mick yet and walks out into the yard. Compare the behavior of Phoebe's mother with that of Phoebe with Zoe. Both have tried to tune out their friends when they tried to talk to them about Mick. Zoe had an experience that made her feel better about Mick's death that she wants to share with Phoebe. Phoebe, on the other hand, has had an experience in Mick's room that she wants to share with her mother. These examples seem to indicate that a person has to come to terms with death in their own time. No one can help a person feel better if they are not yet ready to feel better.

Also note Phoebe's explanation of why she runs to the spot where Mick was killed after the incident with her mother. In Phoebe's mind this was not the place that he was killed, but the last place that she knew that he had been. She seems to hope that at this spot, she will be able to feel close to Mick again.



# Tap Dancing on God's Piano

## Tap Dancing on God's Piano Summary

Phoebe writes at the beginning of this chapter that although she was often disobedient and rebellious, her treatment of her mother after the incident in the kitchen was bad even for her. At every opportunity, whenever she was in hearing distance from her mother Phoebe would say Mick's name. Finally, Phoebe's mother asks Phoebe what she is doing. At this Phoebe runs to her room. She realizes she doesn't like who her family has become, or who she has become. At this point, Phoebe calls Zoe. They really talk for the first time since Mick had died.

The interment of Mick's ashes takes less than thirty minutes. Phoebe calls Zoe this same day at midnight. When Phoebe tells Zoe she is not all right, Zoe comes over to her house. They sit on the couch and Phoebe tells Zoe about the interment. Phoebe seems to be most concerned about how little there was left of Mick after he was cremated. She also wonders exactly where Mick is. Although Zoe tries to comfort her by telling her that Mick is in heaven, Phoebe admits this is not a good enough explanation. She wants to be able to picture Mick being in a specific location that she can picture in her mind.

Phoebe indicates that all of the easy answers that everyone has given her about Mick's death don't make any sense. She doesn't understand why it would be in God's plan to need a seventh-grader who can't even program a VCR. If it was an truly just an accident, over which God had no control, that would mean God was not all powerful. As Phoebe cries in Zoe's arms, Zoe makes the comment that if Phoebe wants a specific place to put Mick, she should put him everywhere. She reasons that if God is everywhere, and Mick is with God, it comes to reason that Mick is everywhere also. This realization that Mick could be able to hear her gives Phoebe a sense of peace.

## Tap Dancing on God's Piano Analysis

It is in this chapter of the book that Phoebe begins to enter the second stage of grief. This stage is that of anger. She is angry with Mick for dying and turning her family into the different, terrible people they have become.

It is also in this chapter that Phoebe begins to come to terms with Mick's death. After the interment of her brother's ashes, Phoebe finally opens up and talks to Zoe. It is during the girls' conversation that Phoebe begins to have some peace with Mick's death.

Information in this section actually deals with some very deep questions about death and the afterlife. Phoebe has some difficulties with the easy explanations that some people have given her about Mick's death and the hereafter. Phoebe feels these explanations are not thorough enough and have many holes that are difficult to understand. Zoe finally suggests to Phoebe, who desperately needs to know where

Mick is, that Mick is everywhere. This explanation seems to help give Phoebe some peace.



# Getting a Grip

## Getting a Grip Summary

Phoebe writes first that Mick's memorial service was on a Saturday. She then goes on to explain that Mick had already requested to be cremated. Mick had been terrified and sickened by his great-grandmother's body at her funeral. He laughed hysterically when he saw a handkerchief in his great-grandmother's pocket and wondered if she would really need the handkerchief. After the funeral, Mick had announced that he wanted to be cremated.

In the car on the way to Mick's service, Phoebe notices that her mother has some strands of grey hair. As Phoebe realized that these she hadn't had these greys before, Phoebe reaches out and touches her mother's hair. Her mom takes Phoebe's hand with one hand and Pop's hand with the other. As they enter the church hand in hand for the memorial service, Phoebe remembers having to remind herself to act natural. She is struck with the idea that she shouldn't have to worry about the way she is acting at her brother's funeral.

There were prayers recited at the memorial service. Then different people got up and told stories about Mick. Phoebe is the last to tell a story about Mick. Because neither of her parents felt they'd be able to talk, Phoebe had agreed to go instead. She shares her mother's favorite Mother's Day card from Mick with the congregation. The card was made by Mick at school on a day when he and his mother had an argument about why Mick could not get a tattoo.

## Getting a Grip Analysis

In this chapter, Phoebe describes Mick's memorial service. She also describes why Mick was cremated and not buried. In the story, she describes the way in which Mick was so terribly disturbed at his great-grandmother's funeral when he saw her body. After this funeral, both Mick and his mother described the way they wanted their funeral to be. Mick's father had told them that if he, the father, didn't die first, they would have their funeral wishes. As is understood that at that time, Pop didn't dream that he would be dealing with his own son's death so soon.

Phoebe describes the memorial service as being just like Mick. Instead of people crying and mourning, those who had gathered shared stories about Mick with one another. By the end of the service, Phoebe recalls there being a feeling of joy in the church.

Note also that in this section of the novel, Phoebe and her parents seem to come together for the first time since Mick's death. Phoebe realizes for the first time that her mother has developed grey hair just in the last few days. In sympathy, she physically reaches out to her mother. Her mother takes her hand and her father's hand. Phoebe describes them as being connected like a chain. Notice even as the family starts to

come together, there is still the obvious and painful absence of Mick. Phoebe writes that it is like their chain is missing a link.



# Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven

## Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven Summary

In this chapter, Phoebe relates the events of her first day back at school after the memorial service. She threatens a sixth-grader whom she hears refer to Mick as the "dead kid". Phoebe could tell people were looking at her throughout the day. By lunchtime, however, no one had told her they were sorry about Mick's death. When Phoebe finally does talk to her friends about the way they are acting, they react in ways that are embarrassing or stupid. Phoebe decides to leave them alone.

After lunch, Phoebe is still sitting in her seat with her head down when the remainder of the students leave the cafeteria. Zoe suggests she ask the nurse to let her go home. Once in the office, however, the principal takes Phoebe into her office and talks to Phoebe about Mick's death. She refers to Mick's death as Phoebe's "loss". Phoebe takes offense at this phrase and informs Mrs. Berryhill that her brother is not lost, but dead. She then leaves school without checking with the nurse and goes home.

When Phoebe returns home, her grandmother from Florida is on the phone with Mrs. Berryhill. Although Nana snaps her fingers at Phoebe, Phoebe runs down the hall to Mick's room and buries herself in his bed.

Phoebe dreams she is in a forest with Mrs. Berryhill. Phoebe tries to find out for whom or for what Mrs. Berryhill is looking. Wocket, the dog, comes running toward Phoebe. Mick runs up behind the dog. He is holding a cereal box and wearing a shirt that Phoebe thinks is really cool. She assumes it came out of the box and tries to grab it from Mick but he won't let her have it. They wrestle on Mrs. Berryhill's desk. Phoebe begins to hear a weird snorting sound and realizes that it is the sound of Wocket laughing. Phoebe wakes herself up laughing at this point in her dream.

As she wakes up, Phoebe hears the door to Mick's room open. Her mother is standing there. Phoebe realizes how terrible it must be for her mother to see her laying in Mick's bed. She begins rambling about memories of Mick and her dream about her brother and Wocket. As Phoebe continues to talk about Mick, her mother finally laughs at one memory, then comes into Mick's room and sits on the edge of his bed. She finally lays down on Mick's bed with Phoebe and asks her to talk more about her dream.

That same night, Phoebe's Nana fixed dinner. Instead of allowing the family to eat in front of the television, however, Nana set the kitchen table. Only she didn't set the places where they usually were. In this way the family was not looking at Mick's empty chair and remembering what had happened.





## Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven Analysis

In this section of the book, Phoebe's family begins to experience some healing. For the first time, Phoebe and her mother lay on Mick's bed together and talk about him. Nana, Phoebe's grandmother from Florida, either accidentally or on purpose gets the place mats all mixed up at the kitchen table. Because the family is no longer concentrating on Mick's empty place, they are actually able to sit at the table and eat together.

Phoebe's first day back at school, however, does not go as well as she had hoped. People stare at her, one even refers to her as the dead kid's sister. This reference first makes Phoebe sick, then she becomes angry and pushes the kid up beside the lockers. During lunch, even Phoebe's friends don't offer any support or sympathy. They all eat quickly, then seem relieved to be able to get away from her. Zoe stays with Phoebe even after all the other kids have left the cafeteria. Zoe suggests that Phoebe get permission to go home.

When Mrs. Berryhill tries to comfort Phoebe, she makes the mistake of referring to Mick's death as a loss. Phoebe becomes very irate at the idea that Mick is lost and angrily insists that Mrs. Berryhill not refer to him as such. It is after this conversation that Phoebe has her dream about Mick. The conversation about Mick being "lost" translates in the dream into Mrs. Berryhill looking for Mick in the forest. When Phoebe calls, however, Mick quickly comes, proving that he is not lost at all. In fact, Mick is with Wocket, and both are happy. Wocket is even laughing. This dream effects not only Phoebe but also her mother. Her mother hears Phoebe laughing in Mick's room and opens the door. In an attempt to explain why she is there, Phoebe begins telling her mother about her dream and about Mick. The look on her face tells Phoebe that she thinks that Phoebe is mocking her again. By continuing to talk, Phoebe convinces her mother this is not the case. Phoebe's mother finally softens to the point she joins Phoebe on the bed and the two talk about Mick as well as Phoebe's dream.



# Common Sense and Good Judgment

## Common Sense and Good Judgment Summary

Phoebe introduces this chapter by first describing a dangerous intersection with no stop light near their house. After enough accidents, the city finally installed a traffic signal. However, the first time Phoebe and her father drove through the intersection with the light, somebody ran the light and Phoebe's dad had to swerve to keep from hitting the other person's car.

At this point, Phoebe's dad begins to lecture her about people needing to use common sense and good judgment. He turns to look at Phoebe as he talks, and doesn't notice his driving, so the car drifts into the other lane of traffic. Phoebe notes that two separate cars blew their horns at him. She writes that she learned from this experience that even smart people do stupid things every once in a while. She next points out that often we get away with this stupid stuff so often that we think we are going to get lucky and get away with them forever. This is true, she believed with Mick. He had gone all of his life without ever falling off his bike. For this reason, he would never wear a helmet. Phoebe writes that it is the one thing for which she cannot forgive her brother.

About a week after her first experience with Mrs. Berryhill, Phoebe is called into the principal's office. Although she's still thinking she might get detention, Phoebe is surprised when a woman from the PTA asks her to speak at a bicycle safety assembly. Although Phoebe at first says that she cannot speak at the assembly, she later changes her mind and agrees to take part.

About eight hundred people attend the bicycle safety assembly. When she stands in front of those gathered, Phoebe is surprised because she doesn't feel nervous. She first shows the crowd a bow tie with pink flamingos that Mick's grandmother gave him for Christmas. She tells the people that Mick never wore this tie because he thought it made him look stupid.

Phoebe next shows the crowd a trout-shaped hat that Mick also wouldn't wear because it made him look like a doofus. The next item that Phoebe pulls from her bag is Mick's bicycle helmet. Mick also wouldn't wear this helmet because he thought it made him look stupid.

## Common Sense and Good Judgment Analysis

In this chapter, Phoebe makes clear the point that Mick's death could have been avoided. Mick would not wear his bicycle helmet because he believed that it made him look like a dork. Earlier in the chapter, Phoebe had made a point through a story about her father that even smart people do things that aren't very smart sometimes. Through the combination of these two stories, the point becomes clear that Mick's accident could have been avoided had he been wearing a bicycle helmet. Because Mick did not want

to look like a dork, he chose not to wear his helmet. Phoebe makes her point also that people make choices all the time that aren't the best choices that they could make. Mick's choice not to wear a helmet was one of these not very smart choices.

# Forever

## Forever Summary

In this final chapter of the book, Phoebe writes that she hopes that what she said at the assembly will help someone else to use better judgment before they decide to try riding a bike with no safety helmet. Phoebe also reports that things are beginning to return to normal at home. Her mother has begun getting up and getting dressed on most mornings. She has even started going back to work.

Phoebe's guilt that she did not ride Mick's bike home for him the day of the accident continues to grow. One day after a soccer game, she finally talks to her father about what happened the day of the accident. Phoebe apologizes because she believes that it was her actions that allowed the accident to happen. If she had acted differently, Mick might be alive.

Phoebe's father begins to recite things that might have been done differently that day that might have kept Mick from having his accident. Phoebe's dad lists a series of eight different things that might have changed the instances of Mick's accident. The final option that he suggests is if he had made Mick wear his bicycle helmet, Mick would still be alive.

On the one-month anniversary of Mick's death, Phoebe finds that she does not want to leave the soccer field after that day's practice. Phoebe writes that she has good memories of time spent with Mick on that field. As she thinks about her brother, Phoebe notices some workmen setting new bleachers in concrete. She waits for them to finish their job and leave.

When the men finally leave, Phoebe picks up a stick that she has had her eye on all afternoon. She walks to the still wet concrete and writes in it a tribute to Mick. Phoebe is pleased with her efforts because she knows the marks that she has made in the concrete will be there forever.

## Forever Analysis

It is in this chapter that Phoebe finally realizes that Mick's death was not solely her fault. Her father helps her to realize there were any of a variety of factors that might have affected the outcome of that day. She also realizes at this time that her father also feels guilty because he did not force his son to wear his bicycle helmet.

Many details in this chapter have the cyclic effect of reminding the reader of the first chapter of the book. Just as Phoebe and Mick wrote in the concrete during their first "caper" together, Phoebe again writes in the concrete at the school's soccer field. This time her act of vandalism is also a lasting tribute to her brother.

Also, notice that Phoebe repeats at the conclusion of the final chapter of the book words that are similar to those in the opening section of her first chapter. She ends the book by reminding the reader that Mick is not longer here, but that while he was here, he was a very neat, well-loved brother. Phoebe had reached her goal of telling her reader about her brother.



# Characters

## Phoebe Harte

Phoebe Harte is Mick's older sister. Phoebe is thirteen. She is older than Mick by ten months. Phoebe was a planned child. Phoebe is very close to her brother. For instance, when Mick was learning to talk, Phoebe was the only one who was able to understand him. She and Mick often pulled pranks on their parents and others together.

Phoebe acts as the narrator for this novel. Although Phoebe deals with a very serious subject, her uniquely sarcastic yet humorous point of view keeps the novel from being too dark. As the narrator, Phoebe tells her reader from the start of the novel that she doesn't want her story to be a tearjerker. Her goal is to tell people about her brother. Phoebe takes her reader through the grieving process from a child's point of view.

Phoebe does tell many stories about Mick during the course of her story. These stories help to describe the personality and individual characteristic of Mick without Mick ever actually having been a character in the action of the novel. Phoebe tells about the pranks that her brother would play on people. She tells about Mick's obsession with killing flies. She also tells about his need to be trendy and sharply dressed. Finally, Phoebe tells about Mick's refusal to wear a bicycle helmet because it made him look like a doofus.

## Mick Harte

Mick Harte is the twelve-year-old brother of Phoebe Harte. He is a seventh-grade boy who is killed in a bicycle accident because he was not wearing a bicycle helmet. The action of the story takes place after Mick's death, so Mick is a character in the book only in flashbacks. However, Phoebe makes it clear that it is her intent in her book to share her brother's life with her reader.

Mick appears to be a very smart boy, but also one who was overly concerned with the way that he looked to other people. When he learned that he was seen in church in a christening gown, which he likened to a lady's nightwear, he refused to wear anything to church after that but a black shirt and camouflage pants, an outfit that spoke to the idea that Mick had only masculine and no feminine qualities. Mick is also overly concerned with not looking like a dork. For this reason, he refuses to wear a bicycle helmet. Mick also had never fallen off his bike or had a bicycle accident up until the point that he was killed. Therefore, he does not consider that there might be a chance that he would be hurt while on his bike.



## Mother

Mick and Phoebe's mother is never given a name through the course of the novel. This makes sense because the novel is written from the viewpoint of the child. The child would not have called her mother by her first name. Phoebe's mother earned a chemistry degree in college. According to Phoebe, she works in a lab where she handles viruses and germs. The reader learns this information because Phoebe notes that her mother does not dress up for work like her father does because she doesn't want to get germs on her good clothes.

It is Phoebe's mother who sets up the schedule for Mick and Phoebe to follow on school mornings so that they won't get in each other's way and get into disagreements on school mornings. Phoebe's mother also weighs out food on a kitchen scale to ensure that each member is getting his or her proper dietary requirements.

After Mick's death, Phoebe's mother begins taking anti-anxiety medicine that makes her sleep a good deal of the time. Although Phoebe seems frustrated with her mother's inability to talk to her about Mick, Phoebe also realizes how wrong it is to try to make her mother feel bad about her inability to talk. Phoebe spends the biggest part of one day taunting her mother with Mick's name until she realizes how low and mean she has become.

It is after Phoebe has her dream about Mick and Wocket in heaven that Phoebe and her mother really talk about Mick for the first time after his death. Phoebe's mother opens Mick's door when she hears Phoebe laughing in his room. Although Phoebe is afraid she will hurt her mother again, Phoebe keeps talking until she makes her mother realize that she wants to try and remember Mick the way he was. She finally succeeds in getting her mother to laugh. They then lay on Mick's bed together and talk about Phoebe's dream.

## Pop

Like the Harte children's mother, their father is also not given a proper name. He is referred to only as Pop. Their father, like their mother, also has a degree in chemistry. Pop perhaps pays more attention to detail than their mother. He refuses to put on his slacks until right before he leaves the house to keep from wrinkling them. For this reason, he walks around the house in the morning in a dress shirt, boxers and socks. Phoebe finds this outfit very disturbing. Although both his children are very spontaneous and full of energy, Pop seems to have little patience with their capers. He often punishes Phoebe and Mick by sending them to their rooms and making them think about what they have done wrong. Pop is so frustrated with Mick's fashionable stage that when he comes home from trying to shop for clothes with Mick, some of his hair is pulled out.

After Mick's death, Pop seems to be less concerned about the details. In fact, Phoebe refuses to allow people to see him because his clothes are wrinkled from being slept in.



Phoebe does not seem to have as much interaction with her father as she does with her mother after Mick's death. One interaction occurs the night of Mick's death when Pop tries to close the door to Mick's bedroom. Phoebe yells at him not to do so. Later when the two are riding in the car together, Phoebe admits to her father that she believes she could have prevented Mick's death. Pop lists a number of factors that could have prevented Mick's death. In this way, he lets Phoebe know that he too feels a certain amount of guilt about Mick's death, but also there is no one thing that would have kept the accident from happening.

## **Zoe Santos**

Zoe Santos is close friends with both Mick and Phoebe. Phoebe writes that both her brother and Zoe have naturally curly hair and think wrestling is real. She believes these are very important ties in their relationship. After Mick's death, Phoebe is taken to Zoe's house to wait for her parents. It is also Zoe who is closest to Phoebe during this time in her life. Zoe talks with Phoebe, often in an attempt to help Phoebe deal with the loss of her brother. Zoe comes over and spends the night when Phoebe calls her the night of Mick's interment. It is Zoe who realizes how difficult Phoebe's first day back to school after Mick's death has been and suggests that she go home for the rest of the day.

## **Coach Brodie**

Coach Broadie is Phoebe's soccer coach. Since Phoebe is in soccer practice when Mick's accident occurs, it is Coach Broadie who has to tell Phoebe that Mick has been in an accident. On the one month anniversary of Mick's death, Phoebe doesn't feel like running. Phoebe writes that Coach Broadie must have sensed something was bothering Phoebe on this day because she didn't fuss at Phoebe like she usually did when Phoebe didn't put forth her best effort at practice.

## **Mrs. Berryhill**

Mrs. Berryhill is the principal at Mick and Phoebe's school. The day of Mick's death, Phoebe is taken into Mrs. Berryhill's office. She remembers thinking that Mrs. Berryhill needed a Tic Tac for her bad breath. Later, when Phoebe goes back to school on the first time, she talks back to Mrs. Berryhill because Mrs. Berryhill continually refers to Mick's death as a loss. The next time she is called into Mrs. Berryhill's office, Phoebe believes she will be given detention, but instead Mrs. Berryhill has a representative from the PTA in her office who wants to ask Phoebe about participating in a bicycle safety assembly.

## **Wocket**

Wocket is the basset hound that Phoebe's parents got for herself and Mick. The dog ate one of Phoebe's Barbies soon after the family got the dog, so Phoebe was never really





close to Wocket. Wocket, however, was Mick's best friend. When Wocket had to be put to sleep because of cancer, Mick stayed with her until she was gone. After her death, Mick would talk to the pictures of Wocket that he had tucked around the edges of the mirror on his dresser. Phoebe is comforted by a dream that she has in which Wocket is laughing in heaven.

## **Nana from Florida**

Nana from Florida is Phoebe's grandmother. She comes and stays with Phoebe and her family after Mick's death. Nana cooks spaghetti one night and insists that the family eat at the table together. When she sets the table, however, Nana mixes up the spots where family members generally sat. Because they are no longer concentrating on Mick's empty chair, Phoebe and her family begin to eat together at the table again.

## **Mrs. Somebody-or-other from the PTA**

Mrs. Somebody-or-other from the PTA is the lady who approaches Phoebe about participating in the bicycle safety assembly. She indicates to Phoebe that she believes that if Phoebe spoke at the assembly, it would have a big affect on those gathered. Although Phoebe first brushes off the idea, she later changes her mind and agrees to participate.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Cereal Box**

It is a cereal box over which Mick and Phoebe argue the day of Mick's accident.

### **Skull-and-crossbones Pirate Tattoo**

Phoebe admits in her book that she is fighting with her brother over this tattoo not because she wants it, but because she does not want her brother to have it.

### **Letters F-A-R-T**

In their first caper together, Mick and Phoebe use a stick to scratch the letters F-A-R-T in the fresh pavement of their driveway.

### **Mick's Christening Gown**

Mick is embarrassed after he sees this gown, which is long and lacy with blue ribbons and a lace hat.

### **A Black T-shirt with a Motorcycle on the Front**

After he sees his christening gown, Mick refuses to wear anything but this shirt, paired with camouflage pants, to church.

### **Red Cowboy Hat**

Mick taught his dog, Wocket, to wear this cowboy hat. After the dog's death, Mick wears the hat all of one afternoon without even realizing that he has it on.

### **His Treasures**

Phoebe remembers good memories of Mick as she looks through the odds and ends that Mick referred to as his treasures.



## **Unopened Cigar**

Mick found this unopened cigar, which had printed on it "It's a Girl". Although this cigar was one that new fathers would give out, Mick thought it meant the cigar was a girl. As a result, he named the cigar Helen.

## **Mobile Field Unit (MFU)**

Mick's mobile field unit was a fly swatter that he took with him to sports events and family gatherings.

## **A Flower**

When Phoebe goes to visit the site of Mick's accident, she discovers that someone has left a flower at this spot.

## **Bicycle-safety Assembly**

Phoebe is asked by a member of the PTA to speak at this assembly.

## **Bicycle Helmet**

This bicycle helmet is the final article that Phoebe shows the people gathered at the bicycle safety assembly. If Mick had been wearing this item at the time of his accident, it would probably have saved his life.



# Themes

## What Happens After Death

One of the things that worries Phoebe the most about her brother's death is her feeling that she has no physical place she can point to that Mick is. One of the ideas that she discusses with her friend Zoe is her need to be able to visualize where Mick is. She has trouble seeing Mick in heaven because the descriptions of heaven that she has received do not seem to be any place that Mick would like to be. Zoe finally comes up with the idea that Mick is everywhere. Her reasoning is that if Mick is with God, and God is everywhere, Mick must be everywhere also. This is an explanation that Phoebe can accept.

Also Phoebe seems to be intent upon determining if Mick can hear her or not. She has two experiences that seem to reassure her that her brother is not as far away from her as he seems. First, one day Phoebe is in Mick's room looking at some of his "treasures". She laughs when she remembers the way that Mick killed a fly that had landed on someone's head with his flip-flop. Phoebe writes in her book that she gets the eerie feeling that Mick is laughing along with her. Later, Phoebe has a dream about Mick and his dog Wocket. In her dream she sees not only Mick but also Wocket interacting happily together in a place she assumes is heaven. She is surprised to see that even the dog is laughing.

## The Process of Grief

One of the major themes of this novel is the process of grief. Although Phoebe doesn't want grief to be the main idea of the book, the steps one must take when working through a major loss are defined. As much as she can, Phoebe describes herself and her parents as they work their way through the five most common phases of grief.

Denial is the first stage that most people go through after they have suffered a major loss. In Phoebe, this phase is exhibited during the time that she waits for her parents to pick her up from her friend Zoe's house the day of Mick's accident. Although she has been told it was Mick who was injured in the accident, she tries to make herself believe, even prays that it might be someone else.

Anger is another stage of grief that Phoebe finds herself in during the course of the novel. Unfortunately, Phoebe takes most of her anger out on her mother, who is also grieving. Phoebe wants to talk to her mother about what has happened to Mick. When her mother walks away, Phoebe becomes angry with her. Phoebe's anger causes her to treat her mother in a way that is both childish and mean.

Those suffering with a loss often find themselves making bargains that they believe might bring their loved one back. Phoebe seems to go through this stage at the same time that she deals with the stage of denial. Phoebe prays to God during her time at



Zoe's house that it was not really Mick who was involved in the accident. Although she knows that it is not right, Phoebe prays that it was one of Mick's friends and not Mick who was hurt.

Depression is a state evidenced by all members of the Harte family. They don't eat, they don't shower, they sleep in their clothes. Phoebe's mom has begun taking anti-anxiety medication that makes her sleep a good deal of the time. Phoebe watches as her father breaks down into tears. Even Phoebe writes that she has stopped eating to the point that she has lost weight.

Although the family has really still not accepted Mick's death at the end of the novel, they are moving toward that point together. Phoebe's dream about she, Mick and Wocket laughing together has brought her a great deal of healing. This healing continues when Phoebe and her mother finally talk to each other about Mick as they lay on his bed together. The family also does much healing as they hear stories of Mick's positive impact on the people around him at his memorial service.

## **Bicycle Safety**

One idea that author Park seems to hope that her readers will take away with them is the idea of bicycle safety. It is stressed that all of the Harte family's grief could have been avoided if Mick had been wearing his helmet at the time of the accident. Phoebe writes in her book that Mick would not wear the helmet because he thought that it made him look like a doofus. However, it is better to look like a doofus and be alive than look cool and be dead.

Phoebe also makes the point that much of the cause of Mick's accident was the result of Mick not using good judgment. As Phoebe is receiving this talk from her father, he drives their car into a lane of oncoming traffic. Although no injuries result from this accident, Phoebe learns from this experience that even smart people, like her father, sometimes make bad judgment calls. Mick's accident was no one's fault, including Mick's, however, there were things that Mick and his family could have done to prevent the accident. The main thing they could have done was to insist that Mick wear his helmet.



# Style

## Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of thirteen-year-old Phoebe Harte. Phoebe is the sister of twelve-year-old Mick Harte, who was killed in a bicycle accident. Phoebe makes a good narrator for this story because it is a story intended for children, teens and young adults. Phoebe is able to tell her story in a way that these age groups can relate to the things that Phoebe is experiencing.

Probably about seventy-five percent of Phoebe's story is told through exposition while twenty-five percent is made up of dialogue. Much of the expository sections of the book deal with Phoebe's attempts to sort out the way that she is feeling and reacting emotionally to the loss of her brother. It also during these sections of the book that Phoebe explains her motivations behind her odd behaviors and reactions to others during this time.

## Setting

This book is set in the town and neighborhood in which Phoebe and her family lived. No name is assigned to this town. It could be any small town in the United States. By not naming the town, either with a real or fictional name, Park allows the setting to be transient; therefore, it becomes a story that could take place anywhere.

The Harte's home is one of the major settings in this novel. It is in the kitchen of this home that Mick and Phoebe have their squabble about the pirate tattoo the day of Mick's death. It is also in this kitchen that Phoebe confronts her mother about her mother's refusal to talk about Mick after his death.

Another significant setting in this book is Mick's bedroom. It is here that Phoebe seems to find healing from the pain of her brother's death. When she sees the pictures of Mick's beloved dog Wocket posted on his dresser, she remembers Mick's struggle with grief when the animal was put to sleep. It is also when she is in this room that Phoebe has the dream in which she sees Mick and Wocket. Mick is happy, even Wocket is happy. Phoebe's mother comes into Mick's room when she hears Phoebe laughing as a result of the dream. Even though she is still hurting, Phoebe's mother comes into the room and lays with Phoebe on Mick's bed. The two have their first conversation since Mick's death at this point.

Other significant settings are the road near the school where Mick is killed as well as the soccer field where Phoebe is practicing at the time of the accident. Action also takes place in the principal's office at the school, at Zoe Santos' house and the church where Mick's memorial service is held.



## Language and Meaning

The language of this book is the language of a teenager. It is not only written in a language to which a teen or young adult can relate but also employs a sarcastic humor that keeps the story from becoming too heavy and dramatic. Since the book is written in the perspective of a teenager, it follows that the language used is very informal. There is, however, no foul or gruesome language used in the book.

The reader can tell a great deal about how serious Phoebe is about what she is writing not only by the words that she chooses, but also by the length of her sentences. As Phoebe becomes more serious, her sentences become shorter and more pointed. Often when Phoebe really wants to make a point, she will break her thoughts down into short one sentence paragraphs as is shown at the end of the book.

## Structure

This book is structurally interesting because Phoebe informs her readers right off the bat that Mick is dead. She does not intend to drop a surprise ending where her brother dies in a senseless accident. She is upfront about the intention of her novel by explaining that she just wants to write about her brother. Her book, however, addresses much more than just her brother. As Phoebe works through the events of the first four weeks after her brother's death, she describes her family's actions and reactions as they work through the process of grief.

In her first couple of chapters, Phoebe describes what happened the day that her brother died. She then moves on to the first few days after his death when the family was waiting for his cremated remains to be returned to them. She also describes the events of the burial and also the memorial service a few days later.

Toward the end of the book, Phoebe writes about the way that students react to her on her first day back at school after her brother's death. She describes the way in which even the most well-meaning people said things that she considered meaningless and stupid. It is after this first day of school that Phoebe dreams about Mick and Wocket. This dream seems to be a turning point for both Phoebe and her mother as it gives them an opportunity to talk to each other about Mick's death in a format that is not related to death or grief.

This book is divided into nine relatively brief chapters. Each chapter bears a worded title that gives the reader some idea what the chapter will be about. These chapters are often divided into sections indicated by blank lines in the text of the chapter. These blank lines indicate a change in thought or time.



## Quotes

"Just let me say right off the bat, it was a bike accident."  
p. 3

"I don't want to make you cry. / I just want to tell you about Mick."  
Mick, p. 4

"I should probably mention that I didn't really want the tattoo. But that wasn't the point. The point was, I didn't want him to have it."  
Mick, p. 8

"I still hadn't cried. It wasn't that kind of pain yet. Mostly it was just this total feeling of emptiness in my gut. Like a cannonball had been shot cleanly through my middle."  
The Serengeti Sucks, p. 26

"I mean grieving isn't exactly the kind of activity that makes you want to leap out of bed in the morning and get "up and at 'em."  
The Serengeti Sucks, p. 33

"Because I swear to God, for just a second, I had the most incredible feeling that somewhere Mick was laughing too."  
Treasures, p. 41

"It sounds morbid. I know it does. But all I wanted to do was feel close to my brother. And so in my mind, I wasn't running to the place he had died. I was just running to the last place he had been."  
Treasures, p. 42

"Not to mention the fact that it's a little hard to believe that the most powerful being in the entire universe needs a seventh-grader who can't even program a VCR without screwing up the TV."  
Tap Dancing on God's Piano, p. 51

"Because like if God is everywhere the way they say he is, and Mick is with God, the Mick could be everywhere too."  
Tap Dancing on God's Piano, p. 53

"I mean I bet you anything God would rather hear laughing than all that crying and begging for forgiveness people dump on his every week."  
Getting a Grip, p. 60

"'He's not my loss, Mrs. Berryhill,' I told her. 'I didn't just misplace him or leave him behind on a bus somewhere. He died, okay? Mick died.'  
Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven, p. 67





"Accidentally on purpose, she had gotten us back to the table. Eating as a family again."  
Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven, p. 74

"And the lesson I ended up learning that day was that even smart guys with chemistry degrees do stupid stuff once in a while."  
Dogs Can Laugh in Heaven, p. 76

"Mick Harte was here. / And now he's gone. / But for twelve years and five months, my brother was one of the neatest kids you'd ever want to meet."  
Forever, p. 88



## Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast Phoebe's experience with grief when her brother dies with what Mick experiences when his dog, Wocket, dies.

In what ways does Phoebe's family change after Mick's death?

Explain the stages of grief as portrayed in this story. Use specific examples from the book.

What does the book teach about what happens to people after they die? In what way does this knowledge make Phoebe feel better about her brother?

Discuss what the book teaches about bicycle safety. How does Park incorporate this theme into the book?

How does Nana's "mistake" get the Harte family back together eating in the dining room? In your opinion were Nana's actions accidental or on purpose?

Consider the way in which Phoebe's classmates and teachers react to her when she returns to school after Mick's death.