

Mockingbird Study Guide

Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine

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



Contents

Mockingbird Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-5.....	4
Chapters 5-10.....	7
Chapters 11-15.....	9
Chapters 16-20.....	12
Chapters 21-25.....	15
Chapters 26-30.....	17
Chapters 31-39.....	19
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	34

Plot Summary

This is a sensitively-written story of the human heart's ability to repair itself from loss and tragedy and to reinvest in life. The author says it was inspired by the 2007 campus shootings of 33 people at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia. It answers the unspoken question that follows such a horrific event: what could be worse than this? In the story of Caitlin Smith, the answer is "a lot." Caitlin is a 10-year-old pre-adolescent with Asperger's Syndrome; her mother has died years before; her brother Devon is killed in a random shooting at his school, along with a teacher and another student. Already withdrawn and painfully shy, Caitlin is pushed to the very edge of insanity by the loss of her beloved brother. Her surviving father is practically paralyzed by his grief and pain, and often unavailable to Caitlin emotionally. The horrendously destructive effects of gun violence are rendered in heartbreaking detail and with real compassion.

The reader witnesses Caitlin developing empathy toward her shattered father, who can sit for hours speechless on the sofa staring off into space. As she begins to see and feel his shock and pain, she can identify the same feelings within herself. This personal growth for Caitlin is largely spontaneous, although it does correspond to some of the teachings she receives from Mrs. Brook, a special education teacher at school. Caitlin is encouraged to look at the person who is speaking to her, to recognize her own feelings and how her behavior affects others. Caitlin is helped in this direction, too, by an art teacher who encourages her to express whatever she is feeling through creativity.

She is constantly coached in the importance of empathy and given the message that she ought to seek "closure" on her brother's murder and her feelings connected to that violent crime. In the beginning of the book, Caitlin withdraws from all forms of human contact; by the end of the story she seeks out human companionship. Her transformation is what eventually draws her father out of the prison of his own suffering and helps to make a foundation for their healing. The reader feels that Caitlin and her father will not only survive, but prevail over, their mutual losses. In this process of healing, both father and daughter are transfigured spiritually.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

Having already lost her mother, Caitlin Smith is shocked and numbed when her older brother Devon is killed in a random school shooting. When friends, neighbors and family offer to help she quite honestly says she doesn't need or want help. Because she has Asperger's Syndrome, she is challenged by her father and teachers to be more open to people and receive their loving, caring energy in the eternal give-and-take of life. Caitlin uses a chart of feelings that shows various emotional expressions linked to descriptive words, to help her get in touch with her own feelings and stay connected to reality. The death of her brother, though, pushes her back almost to the beginning of her self-healing work. She is angry with the world, although unable to identify the feeling and give it proper expression.

One aspect of her disassociation from the world is a peculiar obsession with the literal truth or falsehood of words others use to communicate. For example in a discussion with her principal, Miss Harper, Caitlin tells her that her counselor, Mrs. Brook, has told her she can always come talk because her door is "always open." The truth is her door is almost always closed, "but if you knock then she remembers to open it," Caitlin reports. When Caitlin feels particularly overwhelmed, she has a habit of sucking on the cuffs of her sleeves.

Trying to establish communication with Caitlin, the principal offers her some candy but when Caitlin hesitates, the principal pushes a piece into her hand, which makes her feel ill because she hates being touched. And, "I don't like being trapped by the puffy blue wall," Caitlin confesses to the reader. For the same reason, Caitlin hates recess when she must come in contact with other students. She calls it her "recess feeling."

Caitlin is baffled and uncomfortable in her sessions with Mrs. Brook. She grows to hate the psychologist's opening line: "Let's talk about it." When Mrs. Brook quizzes Caitlin about how she felt at her brother's funeral, Caitlin repeatedly answers her questions with "I don't know." Finally she asks the psychologist to stop asking her questions. Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin that her father is sad because he misses Devon; she assures Caitlin that her brother is still with her but in a different way. Caitlin angrily protests that she wants her brother around in the old way "when he makes me popcorn and hot chocolate" instead of the new way. While visiting Mrs. Brook one afternoon, Caitlin climbs under the table to escape her eyes and rubs her finger on the raw wood until it bleeds, then continues rubbing and smears blood everywhere. She persists although Mrs. Brook tells her to stop.

When she goes home, Caitlin's father tells her he knows about her TRM (tantrum rage meltdown) and asks if she wants to discuss it. She goes to her room, falls asleep with her stuffies and awakens in the evening with an appetite. She tells her father it's 6:30 and time for dinner. He says he's not hungry, but Caitlin asks if they can order a pizza



since it's Thursday—the day when she, her father and brother usually had pizza. Her father says they should eat at home to save money; they dine on Pop-Tarts and salad with applesauce. As they are eating this grim meal, her father starts crying again so Caitlin clears her dishes and goes back to her drawings—one of the few things in life that give her pleasure.

As narrator, Caitlin describes the nightmare that recess is for her, with its loud noises, "elbows all pointy and dangerous," and insufferable brightness. She remembers her brother's admonition to enjoy recess while she can because there is no recess in middle school, but nevertheless her anxiety causes nausea so she clasps herself tightly with her arms as a kind of centering strategy. She unfocuses her eyes to produce a fuzzy kind of reality in hopes that will make recess more bearable. Her schoolmate Josh tells Caitlin not to invade his "personal space" and she tries to understand what he means. "I can't help that your brother was shot!" Josh yells at her, and Caitlin runs away screaming.

Chapters 1-5 Analysis

The early part of the shock and anger experienced by Caitlin and her father over the shooting death of her brother, Devon, is expressed by a profound numbing of sensation and feeling. In Caitlin's case, however, detachment from people and emotions was already her problem because of her Asperger's Syndrome. Even before the death of her brother, Devon's father, teacher and school psychologist are engaged in nudging her into a fuller experience of life. Whatever progress that may have been made is wiped out by this latest trauma, coming a few years after the death of her mother. Devastated himself by the loss, Caitlin's father isn't much help to her. The reader feels compassion for these two derelict souls, broken by life's unyielding hand, and wishes that someone or something could swoop into their lives and make them whole again. Caitlin and her father, of course, know this will not happen.

Caitlin is super-sensitive to people, noise and confusion. For these reasons she hates recess when she is thrown into the maelstrom of pre-adolescent energy, and she's driven to the point of near hysteria by the harsh imprecations of classmate Josh, who makes a cruel remark about Devon's death. Caitlin finds solace by being alone with her stuffed animals and sometimes in her "hidey-hole," a small nook in her deceased brother's bedroom. She also loves books and has been tested as having a high IQ.

Although Devon is not the only student killed in the shooting rampage, the survivors—including Michael—seem unable to connect with each other in the early days after the tragedy. Michael is a first grader while Caitlin is 11 and ready to go to middle school—the Virginia Dare Middle School where the shootings took place. Even in elementary school, the students form closed circles of friends and exclude others. There is already a social ranking, an up and a down, among the student body. Because of her Asperger's Syndrome and the sometimes-bizarre behavior and thinking it produces, Caitlin is practically a social outcast. The murder of her brother seems to intensify this isolation as the other students deal with their fears.



Another challenge facing Caitlin is the tendency of some other students to think of her as autistic, like William H. who sometimes eats dirt and speaks glossolalia like a madman. Caitlin on at least one occasion explodes at anger when another student refers to her as autistic, and explains the difference between autism and Asperger's.



Chapters 5-10

Chapters 5-10 Summary

Caitlin checks out 32 books from the public library on the human heart as she tries to find answers to questions about the bullet that penetrated her brother's heart. She recalls that she was tested at eighth grade reading level when she was in kindergarten, and now in fifth grade she can read "anything Dad can." As she reads, Caitlin writes key words in her notebook for further study: chambers, aorta, atria, ventricles, veins, valves. She learns that regular exercise and a good diet are recommended for heart health, and finds that "a gunshot would to the heart is almost always fatal." A teacher, Mrs. Johnson, talks to the fifth grade about group projects and asks for possible animals for study. Caitlin tells her she wants to study the human heart, but the teacher says it must be about an animal. Mrs. Johnson asks Caitlin if she wants help joining a group, and she says no because she's already in a group of one—herself. The teacher insists that she wants Caitlin to join a group, to which Caitlin replies: "I know that's what you want but it's not what I want."

Mrs. Brook asks Caitlin if she has any friends that she'd like to work with on her group project, and specifically asks if she'd like to work with Josh. Caitlin answers that she doesn't like Josh but does like the principal, Miss Harper. "She's the princiPAL," Caitlin says,. "Get it? She's everyone's pal." Her teacher tells Caitlin that she wants her to find someone of her own age group, such as Emma who she describes as "very outgoing." That's the problem, Caitlin says; she doesn't like "outgoing, or effusive, or extroverted, or gregarious "or any of those other words that mean their loudness fills up my ears and hurts, and their face and waving arms invade my personal space." Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin she'll talk with Mrs. Johnson to see if she can be allowed to work alone because of her special circumstances.

Caitlin brings her project on the human heart home and shows it to her father, who drops his head and slumps in his seat as he reads it. He begins to cry again, then suddenly gets up and announces he's going to take a shower. He gives his daughter permission to watch any video she wants while he's in the shower. Caitlin looks at several videos that all remind her of Devon, especially the Bambi story in which the deer's mother is shot to death. Caitlin recalls telling her brother that their mother is dead—really dead—and is never coming back. When she gets that "recess feeling in her stomach, she puts the Bambi video away and decides not to watch television.

Mrs. Brook informs Caitlin that her schedule has been rearranged so Caitlin will meet with her during her regular recess, then have another recess with the younger kids. Caitlin is less than thrilled, because she doesn't like recess. Mrs. Brook takes Caitlin outside to the playground but yells at her when she walks too far ahead of her. Taking a walk with someone means that two people actually walk together, the teacher explains. This enables them to look at each other, hear what the other person is saying and send cues back and forth during their conversation. Caitlin asks why Mrs. Brook wants to



walk together, and she replies that she wants to help Caitlin makes friends so she won't be uncomfortable when she's in middle school next year. Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin to go to one of the teachers if she has any trouble during these recess periods.

At the recess for younger students, Caitlin notices a boy slumped over a bench, his head down, rubbing his eyes "so he's either sleepy or sad." She approaches and asks if he's all right; he doesn't respond so she offers him a candy gummy worm. He eats the worm and says he misses his mother, who was one of the fatalities in the school shooting. The boy, Michael, asks Caitlin if she misses her brother as much as he misses his mother. Just before they part, Caitlin promises to bring him stickers as a reward for having good manners. Before he scurries back to class, they exchange little hand waves and Caitlin thinks she has a new friend.

Chapters 5-10 Analysis

Caitlin uses books and study as a way to numb her feelings of loss and sadness. She converts her grief into intellectual curiosity, and sets about researching the human heart—which is where the bullet that killed her brother lodged. And she is defiant when her teacher wants Caitlin to join a set of other students for a group project. It seems that Caitlin is so emotionally fragile that she needs to control her environment, both at home and at school. In this and in many other instances, Caitlin's teachers seem remarkably understanding and supportive. Despite her brittle nature that often goes against the grain, none of Caitlin's teachers become angry or show any real prejudice toward her. Their approach is one of gentle encouragement, a loving nudge, in the direction they want to see her move. At the same time that her Asperger's and the death of her brother seem almost intolerable burdens, the reader sees how Caitlin also develops into a deeper, more authentic person as a result. She can be shockingly direct and honest, which is difficult for both teachers and students to deal with. For example, when her teacher suggests she work in a group that includes Josh, Caitlin refuses and says she doesn't like Josh.

On the other hand, Caitlin is very sensitive to the moods of others. When she sees a young kid sitting with his head in his hands on the playground, she approaches to see if Michael is OK. A pocket candy helps him to open up to Caitlin. They are both survivors: Michael's mother as well as Caitlin's brother were both killed in the recent school shooting. Despite the difference in their ages, the two are at once bonded. Although she isn't aware at the time, Caitlin is already practicing the empathy that the adults in her life keep telling her she needs to develop. Although Mrs. Brook, the school psychologist, sometimes fumbles in her attempts to gain Caitlin's trust, the sixth grader seems to believe the counselor has her best interests at heart and gradually becomes a little less defiant.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary

Haunted by living memories of her brother's death, Caitlin writes a school paper on the heart because she wants to know more about what happened to Devon when the bullet entered his chest. She returns home with her paper, marked with words of praise and excellence by her teacher but questioning why she capitalizes the word "heart" in the middle of a sentence. Caitlin tells herself the reason is because heart is such an important word. Memories of what her father calls "the day our life fell apart" freely associate in her troubled head as she tries to find something called "closure" in her life. The sounds of her father's screams and the emergency room doctors apologizing for not being able to save Devon echo in her ears, and she imagines herself omnipotent and capable of taking over the pumping action of her brother's heart to keep him alive.

"But then I fall out of the chest because there's no way to close it, and I feel Dad grabbing me but all I can do is scream," she relates. Caitlin recalls being wrapped up warmly in a blanket by her father as he watches TV coverage of the arraignment of the suspect. When the middle school-aged suspect raises his shackled hands and gives a thumbs-up gesture, Caitlin's father runs into the bathroom and vomits. A neighbor, Mrs. Robbins, come to the house to watch Caitlin while her father takes a shower ("I wonder if it is one of the crying showers," Caitlin asks.) Caitlin clutches her dictionary, where she finds the definition of closure: "the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event, such as the death of a loved one."

Caitlin charges into her appointment with Mrs. Brook and asks if the counselor can tell her how to find closure. Mrs. Brook puts her hands together, scratches her head and frets for a moment, then suggests that Caitlin and her father find some counseling for themselves so they can better discuss feelings. Caitlin asks Mrs. Brook if she can counsel her father, but she reminds her that she is hired only to help students. Mrs. Brook also suggests that sometimes people can find closure through their church. Caitlin is much more comfortable discussing closure with her new friend, Michael, on the playground. They decide Caitlin's dad, who is always unhappy, should hang out with Michael's dad, who is always happy.

Still searching for closure, Caitlin enters Devon's room for the first time since his death, or "The Day Our Life Fell Apart." She is comforted by the still-lingering scent of her brother, his beanbag chair and playthings, and especially her drawings all over his walls. She recalls when he said: "You may be the best artist in Virginia." She checks to see that her nickname, Scout, is still inscribed on the bottom of his chest of drawers just as her brother had carved it with his hunting knife. The name derives from the lead character in "To Kill A Mockingbird," a young, owlish girl who resembles Caitlin. Devon distilled the message of the book and movie for his sister thus: "It's wrong to shoot someone who is innocent and was never going to hurt you in the first place."



Mrs. Brook tries to help Caitlin understand other people's feelings by getting in touch with her own. Caitlin says she wants closure while Mrs. Brook wants her to work on developing empathy as a way to communicate better with others. "All you need to do is imagine how other people are feeling," she tells Caitlin. The counselor calls her attention to two girls on the playground; one has her arm around another girl and is trying to comfort her because "she must be sad or hurt." Caitlin is mystified at how Mrs. Brook can read their emotions just by watching them. Mrs. Brook asks Caitlin to make direct eye contact with her, and to hold her gaze as a way of practicing how to make friends. Holding eye contact and trying to mirror another's emotions is the best way to communicate and make friends. Mrs. Brook advises Caitlin. She runs into Michael, whose mother was killed in the same murderous shooting spree, and asks whether his father told him anything about closure.

Closure, Caitlin tells Michael, "helps you feel better after someone dies" and Michael asks if she can give him some. Caitlin says she doesn't have any, but will give him some when she does. Michael introduces Caitlin to some of his friends and tells them proudly that Caitlin can burp her ABCs. They request, and receive, a demonstration which Caitlin describes as "awesome." She is overjoyed at having new friends and compares herself to Snow White whose life was enriched by living with the seven dwarfs. Caitlin suspects that Mrs. Brook may have Asperger's Syndrome, too, because of the tenacity with which she pushes Caitlin to make friends. When Mrs. Brook asks Caitlin to share some of her feelings, Caitlin replies that she doesn't have any. As an alternative, the counselor tells Caitlin she can share some thoughts and ideas. Caitlin says interpersonal skills are not part of her repertoire.

Other skills she enumerates, besides belching her ABCs, include drawing, memorizing, remembering, research, helpfulness, honesty, reading, seeing and hearing things others don't, loading the dishwasher and persistence.

Chapters 11-15 Analysis

Equating closure with lack of pain, Caitlin becomes obsessive about finding it. She searches everywhere—her brother's room, her friends, her father—but feels she's making no progress. Her counselor, Mrs. Brook, tries to get Caitlin to focus first on empathy because, by her own admission, Caitlin says she hasn't a clue what her feelings are. Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin that as she begins to recognize and identify her own feelings, she will be able to have empathy for other people who have the same feelings. Touchingly, she focuses on the word "heart" both because that is where her brother was shot and because it is also another word for feelings. Her emotions are raw and strong, and this is the perfect time for Caitlin to learn how to understand them.

Initially, Caitlin is terrified of her feelings as well as the strong feelings of others, especially her father who cries constantly. She wants to run from everything, especially the grief surrounding her brother's death. But slowly she begins to see that her father suffers as much as she does but expresses his feelings differently. Caitlin likes to get in touch with Devon by going into his room; her father releases his emotions by crying in



the shower so no one can hear him, or so he believes. Caitlin learns to associate the shower with his crying jags. In one instance, a neighbor comes to care for Caitlin so her father can take a shower. By that time, she is resolved to the situation and accepts her father's style of grieving. By accommodating to his needs, Caitlin is beginning to have an awareness of his feelings. Once she gets the hang of it, Caitlin becomes an astute observer of emotions in others that at any given moment, can be diametrically opposed to hers.



Chapters 16-20

Chapters 16-20 Summary

Rummaging around in her brother's room, Caitlin reads Devon's woodworking books, his notes on completing the chest and a reminder to himself to teach Caitlin woodworking once he's mastered the skills. She wonders if she'll ever be able to learn anything now, because her brother taught her everything she knows. When her father arrives home, he asks Caitlin what she'd like to do for her fast-approaching birthday. Recalling the times when Devon took her shopping at the mall, she replies that she wants her brother to take her to the mall. "He can't," her father replies, telling her that her brother and mother are together in heaven looking down on them and will always love them. When she insists that she wants to go to the mall with Devon, her father drops his head and tears fill his eyes.

Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin her father is concerned that she might not understand that her brother is dead, because she refers to him in the present tense. Caitlin says she knows that Devon is dead, but that he's still a part of her present life. Mrs. Brook suggests that Caitlin make it clear to her father that she knows her brother is never coming back. Caitlin asks if that will make her father happy; the counselor agrees and remarks that she shows empathy by her concern about her father's feelings. Caitlin starts referring to her brother as "Devon-who-is-dead," but it upsets her father and he asks her to stop. She explains that she's trying to respect his feelings, but he leaves the room leaving her puzzled and feeling "even when I try to get it, I still don't get it."

Caitlin encounters Michael and Josh working together in the library, with Mrs. Brook sitting nearby. She says she doesn't think it fair that she must lose her newfound friend just when they are starting to know each other. Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin there's no reason why they can't all be friends, but Caitlin makes a face and says she can't be friends with Josh because "he's evil." Mrs. Brook hushes Caitlin, telling her that the three of them are working on closure. Once again, Caitlin laments that she doesn't know what closure looks or feels like, but she wants it, too. Caitlin is disturbed that Josh will be Michael's once-a-week reading buddy because she has been in the habit of reading to Michael. Mrs. Brook says Caitlin can still read to Michael during recess. Caitlin goes home and sulks in the hidey-hole in Devon's room. She looks at her brother's carving of Scout, from *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and remembers Devon telling her repeatedly that she could do anything she wants if she works hard enough—even become an Eagle Scout. Caitlin tells her father when he comes home that she'd like to live in Devon's room. She leaves Devon's room and goes to her own, where she scrawls "Devon's Room" on a sheet of paper to go on his bedroom door.

Rachel Lockwood shows up at school bruised and bandaged; tells the students she fell off her bike when she thought she heard gunshots at the middle school followed by police sirens. Parroting what her brother told her, Caitlin tells Rachel she should watch where she's going when she rides a bike. The other children stare at Caitlin with this



fresh reminder of mortality, and the loss of her brother to a complete stranger. Rachel asks her peers if she looks really bad, and her friend Emma reassures that she looks fine. But Caitlin tells Rachel her face "looks bad; it's purple and puffy and really gross."

Rachel breaks down and runs out of the room. Emma yells at Caitlin and tells her that her remarks were "mean" and asks: "Didn't anyone ever tell you how to be a friend?" Caitlin realizes she should listen to Mrs. Brook about making and keeping friends, and decides to help Rachel to make amends for her putdown. Trying to be a friend, Caitlin grabs Rachel's desk and chair and drags them to a corner of the room where she won't have to look at the other students—thereby presumably saving her embarrassment. The teacher and Rachel both get upset, and return the desk to its usual position. Mrs. Brook explains to Caitlin that, while she may feel comfortable not looking at the other students, to Rachel it feels like another rejection. "At least I tried dipping my toe in empathy," Caitlin tells herself.

Caitlin tries to practice some empathy on her father when he returns home. She asks him how he's doing; he replies that he's "dealing with a lot of stuff right now." She asks if that includes closure, and he says yes. She tells him she's looking for the same and suggests that he come for a visit with Mrs. Brook who is helping her find closure. Caitlin also suggests that he might find help in books, and he thanks her for her suggestions. Aunt Jolee, the younger sister of Harry (Caitlin's father), calls and Caitlin can tell from one side of the conversation that they're discussing the possibility of him seeing a counselor. He tells Jolee he can't afford it and mentions that Caitlin is getting counseling at school. As she watches her father's hands shake and his body quiver, she decides she's practiced all the empathy she can handle for a while.

Chapters 16-20 Analysis

When Caitlin tries to practice empathy at school, she creates disasters for herself. Her particular challenge seems to be developing an "editor" for the thoughts in her head before they reach her lips. She says she can't be friends with Josh because he's evil; when another girl falls off her bike and gets banged up, instead of consoling Rachel, Caitlin tells her she looks terrible which causes her to collapse in tears and run away. Ironically, Rachel herself seems to be suffering some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder because while riding her bike by the middle school, she imagines that she hears gunshots and falls off her bike while trying to escape. Caitlin's clumsy attempt to rearrange Rachel's desk to save her from having to look at the class simply underlines Caitlin's emotional disconnect from others. To her credit, though, Caitlin keeps reminding herself that she still doesn't "get it." From a strictly clinical point of view, it appears that many of the adults and all of the students affected by the shooting would benefit by antidepressant treatment.

With a profound sense of loneliness and alienation, Caitlin becomes possessive of her relationship with Michael and feels threatened when she sees him studying in the library with her mortal enemy, Josh. At home, too, she clings desperately to the memory of her brother and even asks her father if she can move into his room. The sad irony of the



situation is that neither Caitlin nor her father is capable of providing much support to the other person because each has been gravely wounded in precisely the same way. There is a numbness, a vacancy in their relationship that neither, alone, seems capable of bridging. They are like two survivors of a bomb attack, staggering about in shock and in pain, not knowing what their next step should be. At the center of their relationship, pain and loss have temporarily replaced love and joy. Both father and daughter are acutely in need of healing through an outside source.



Chapters 21-25

Chapters 21-25 Summary

Caitlin is disappointed one day when she finds that Mrs. Brook can't see her because she's gone to visit her sister to help with a difficult twin pregnancy. Caitlin asks Mrs. Johnson, her teacher, if she's pregnant and with a red face, she replies no. At her teacher's suggestion, Caitlin writes a letter to Mrs. Brook telling her she hopes Mrs. Brook can return soon so Caitlin can demonstrate her progress with "finesse" and empathy. Caitlin and her father go to a "fun raiser" for the Virginia Dare Middle School, and he prods her to say hello and speak with the guests. She meets one man who leans over to say hello, can't think of anything to say that's nice, and finally comes out with: "I don't think you're disgusting just because you have hair sticking out of your ear." Her father pulls her back by the shoulders to signal that she should stop talking. A woman with coffee breath comes up to Caitlin and tells her that she'd like to introduce her to Charlie Walters, the middle school art teacher. At the easel where Walters is working, he asks if he can draw her caricature. She replies that her father doesn't need a picture of her because he sees her every day, but Walters explains this kind of picture "captures personality and emotion."

Caitlin's father gets his caricature drawn as Caitlin pays close attention to every detail of the rendering. She is amazed at how the artist draws the eyes so they look "deep and textured and full," while also capturing the sadness in his eyes. Then Mr. Walters tosses Caitlin a charcoal pencil and asks if she wants to draw him. Before she starts, she asks her father to go away and not watch her draw. At first, she starts drawing by getting small suggestions from Mr. Walters. Emma approaches and is amazed at her drawing, but Caitlin tells her the same thing—leave me alone until the picture is finished. She senses something odd about the smile on Walters' face and the vacancy of his stare; she tells him and he complements her on her attention to detail in sensing emotion. Finally, Caitlin puts her charcoal down and says she can't draw his eyes because she's not yet ready to draw complete faces. When Caitlin goes home she takes her sketch and tapes it to the wall in her brother's room, her first drawing of a face.

When Caitlin comes home one afternoon she finds her father standing at the kitchen sink, deep in thought. She asks what's for dinner and he seems mystified. "I'm feeling a little lost," he tells his daughter. Then he asks her if she feels OK about attending Virginia Dare Middle School—where her brother was shot—and she says it will be fine and preferable to private school. On a class trip to the computer lab, Caitlin looks up the definition of closure: "the act of bringing to an end; a conclusion." She thinks of completing Devon's Eagle Scout project, and suddenly realizes what closure is. She screams joyfully: "I get it. I get it!" The next day when her father picks her up from school, Caitlin insists they go to Lowe's to get hinges for Devon's chest. She runs up and down aisles looking for them, until a clerk asks what kind of hinges. Her father says he's not buying hinges, and Caitlin gets irritated. He walks off and she follows, crying all the way



home and until she gets into her hidey-hole. Her father says he's not interested in working on the chest and tells Caitlin not to ask him about it again "for a very long time."

Chapters 21-25 Analysis

Perhaps because of the loss of Caitlin's mother, her counselor Mrs. Brook makes it a point to assure her that she is only on temporary leave from school to help her sister. She also calls Caitlin to try and bolster her spirits. There is obviously love beyond their professional relationship; Mrs. Brook nurtures or mothers Caitlin out of her maternal instinct and the goodness of her heart. Caitlin responds in kind with caring and empathy. Her first contact with the middle school art teacher is prescient of the strong bond they will form; she instantly clicks with Charlie Walters and is fascinated by the way he renders caricatures. Walters turns out to be the angel who rescues Caitlin's soul through the medium of art. When they first meet, Caitlin's drawings are all pencil sketches in black and white as she feels she's not yet ready for colors. Under the guidance of Walters, she finally finds the courage to paint the colors in her mind which is a metaphor for the restoration of her full humanity. This, in turn, gives her the insight and courage to help nudge her father out of his deep depression.

At Caitlin's insistence, her father agrees to go to the hardware store to buy hinges for Devon's chest. But the trip is aborted when her father decides he can't go forward. A heartbreaking setback puts Caitlin back in her hidey-hole and leaves her father in his never never land of bitter memories. But the reader senses that some kind of beginning has been made toward liberation of these two shattered souls, as they try to help each other. The simple fact they are both willing to try something different as a way of coping is itself a hopeful sign. The reader follows the action with bated breath as father and daughter try to reinvent their relationship and come to terms with the reality of their situation.



Chapters 26-30

Chapters 26-30 Summary

During her absence from school, Mrs. Brook calls Caitlin at school to ask how she is and offer encouragement; she also urges her to keep trying to enlist her father in the chest completion project, as a way for them both to reach closure. Caitlin runs into Josh, her full-time critic, in the principal's office and he mutters under his breath, "Loser." But she replies affirmatively by saying she will keep trying to get everything right. Another encounter with her sometime-friend Michael ends abruptly. When she goes home, Caitlin again confronts her father about the chest. He says they can't do any work on it until they have the right wood—quarter-cut oak. Caitlin tries to figure out how to cut oak with a quarter and wonders whether one of the coins from her collection of quarters would do the job. "It will take my whole entire life to get some wood cut out of that oak tree with my Virginia quarter," she concludes after scratching the rough bark until her fingers are bloody.

Caitlin returns to school and to a visit with Mrs. Brook, who lets out a scream when she sees her bloody fingers. Her counselor asks Caitlin to explain why her fingers are bloody, what and why she was trying to cut. Caitlin says she is seeking closure and trying to get some oak to complete the chest. Mrs. Brook says quarter-cut oak is not oak cut with a quarter, and Caitlin learns that quarter-cut oak is a special cut of wood used in construction of mission-style furniture. Mrs. Brook says she will call Caitlin's father to tell him how hard she's been trying to get wood for the project. Her father is concerned that Caitlin has cut her hands trying to get oak, and he takes them in his and examines them closely. She explains again that she needs to reach closure, and tells her father he need it, too. He cries a bit, then agrees with her. He also agrees that they should finish the chest and go to the hardware store the next morning early to get supplies. Caitlin is overjoyed. When he tells her she needs to learn woodworking, she replies that she's already read every one of Devon's books and knows enough to get started. Her father expresses the wish that "something good and strong and beautiful" will come from their project.

Caitlin tries to overcome her shyness and make friends. In the lunch room, she sits next to the popular and pretty Laura, who asks her why she's sitting in Anna's seat and suggests she sit at another table. Caitlin notices Mia, who is less pretty and less popular, sitting with friends at the next table and she sits down. Mia asks her what she wants, and Caitlin responds that she'd like to be friends. Mia giggles and says she'd rather be left alone. When other people come to the table to speak to Mia, Caitlin tells them Mia wants to be alone. Emma, Mia's friend, tells Caitlin that Mia wants her to leave her alone because she's "special," in other words "a little weird." Emma also says Caitlin's behavior is disturbing, and the other girls laugh. One announces to the group that Caitlin is autistic, like William H., which she loudly rejects while running away, screaming. Mrs. Brook tells Caitlin that everyone has different gifts and abilities. For



example, she says, William plays the piano and is good at soccer—two things she can't do at all. She encourages Caitlin to keep trying to make friends.

Chapters 26-30 Analysis

Mrs. Brook's maternal instincts toward Caitlin become obvious when she sees Caitlin's bloody hand that she has injured by obsessively trying to cut a tree with a quarter. The confusion over language that leads Caitlin to this bizarre turn of events arises, evidently, from her Asperger's and inability to understand colloquial speech. For the first time, Caitlin stands up to an abuser—her nemesis Josh. Although she doesn't actually put up her fists and get angry when he calls her "loser," she doesn't run away in tears. She stands her ground and, in effect, apologizes. This isn't much progress in Caitlin's evolving self-esteem, but it's a first step. At home, too, she makes progress. Her desperate attempt to cut some wood from an oak tree using a quarter, so they can complete Devon's oak chest, touches her father's heart and he agrees they should work together on the chest, in honor of her brother. Caitlin's spirits rise in direct proportion to her new feelings of self-worth.



Chapters 31-39

Chapters 31-39 Summary

The phys ed instructor, Mr. Mason, tries to calm an unruly gym class including Caitlin, who hates phys ed as much as recess for its unpredictability, noise and invasion of personal space. Mason yells at the students to separate and announces the day's game —dodgeball. He tosses "pinnies" to all the students and tells them to put them on. Caitlin hesitates because the pinnies feel, to her, like a cold clam. The class is disrupted as teacher and students alike try to find William H., the autistic child who has wandered off again. Mason voices his frustration that "they give me all the autistic kids." Caitlin assumes he refers to William, since he's the only autistic kid. Emma asks Mason if she and some other girls can go see Mrs. Brook about "a girl thing." Red-faced, he allows the girls, including Caitlin, to go to Mrs. Brook's office. When she hears about William, Mrs. Brook marches straight to the gym, talks for a moment with Mason and takes William by the hand. Mason approaches Caitlin and apologizes for his remark about autistic kids. Then he says she doesn't need to wear her pinnie because he's going to wear it, and he fits the yellow sash around his neck.

As they work on the chest, Caitlin asks her father what a Dad-oh is, and he replies that a day-doe is a groove in a piece of wood. Each time she says Dad-oh, her father smiles so she keeps saying it over and over so he'll keep smiling. When he puts her to bed, she says: "God night, Dad-oh" and they both smile broadly. "Closure must be coming," she tells herself. Once her father goes to sleep, Caitlin goes into Devon's room, borrows his Boy Scout knife, and carves her nickname, Scout, into the bottom of the chest. The teacher takes Caitlin's class to the computer lab to do group research on the commonwealth of Virginia. Caitlin draws the state bird, a cardinal, and the state flower, a dogwood, but Brianna says she traced the drawings. Caitlin refutes her accusation, and Emma says the assignment is that objects can be drawn or traced. Josh tries to hassle Caitlin and Emma tells him to "shut up" and mind his own business. Josh's face turns red and he blinks his eyes rapidly. Caitlin says she only draws back and white outlines because colors confuse and disorient her. She runs into Michael, the first grader, on the playground and explains how completing her brother's chest is helping his survivors to closure. He doesn't understand, but invites her to come to a play on the food pyramid in which he is a pear. Caitlin hesitates, but then says she'll come and realizes they're still friends.

Caitlin breaks the news to her father while they're working on the chest that she needs to be at school by 7 p.m. to see Michael's play, because they're friends and because she promised him she would come. She runs outside to the car and yells at her father to come quick. Tensely, they drive to school; her father reassures her that they'll be on time. Caitlin finds a seat and waves at Michael, who waves back. Afterwards, Caitlin's dad and Michael's dad chat while the kids try to make a food pyramid out of the available snacks. On the way home, she asks her father if he recalls "To Kill A Mockingbird" and says he reminds her of Atticus Finch, because of his courage and



dignity. He agrees with his daughter that she resembles Scout, the young girl in the movie. Her father says "life is special," and she asks him if he means that all of life is special/ To which, he agrees. Caitlin concludes that "everybody has to put up with being special because everybody is alive."

On the playground, Caitlin sees Josh pulling Michael's legs on the monkey bars. Michael screams as Caitlin rushes up and starts hitting Josh, telling him he's evil and should leave the littler kid alone. She continues punching until Michael says he's about to fall; Josh then catches Michael in his arms and places him on his feet on the ground. "Josh was helping me," Michael says. "Oh," Caitlin responds. A crowd gathers around Josh and some students tell him he's "bad" and "mean." Josh falls to his knees and weeps, then Michael pats him on the back and Caitlin follows suit. She is aware that she is showing some empathy for Josh. The group shows its Virginia project to the class, with Emma doing all the talking and Caitlin holding up her drawings so she doesn't have to face the audience. Emma asks Caitlin to sit with her group at lunch, then asks if she can do some miscellaneous drawings of school objects for inclusion in the yearbook. Emma suggests that Caitlin join the art club in middle school. At home, Caitlin shows her father a sketch of what she'd like to carve into the top of the dresser—a mockingbird.

When she tells Mrs. Brook that her brother's chest is finished, Caitlin gets a big smile and a query about coming to closure. Caitlin says she's coming close to closure and that working on the chest seems to have helped her father, too. Caitlin sighs, and Mrs. Brook asks her if anything is wrong. She says she's not sure she's gotten closure for Michael. Mrs. Brook says she only needs to find closure for herself, and that the whole school community needs to find closure. She also mentions that the school board voted to change the name of Virginia Dare Middle School during the summer, and asks Caitlin to think of possible new names for the school. When the chest is completed, Caitlin feels an emptiness inside and, reflecting on how her brother's life was stolen, she begins to cry for him—not for herself. She is excited when she realizes she's finally experiencing empathy, and tells her dad they both did a fine job on the chest—one that Devon would be proud to show to his friends and fellow scouts. Caitlin becomes elated with the fact

"I finally get it" and jumps excitedly around the room.

At a dedication ceremony for the new middle school, Devon's chest is unveiled as a gift to the school from Harold Joseph Smith "and his little sister whom he adored—Caitlin." Mr. Walters, the art teacher, gives Caitlin a new sketchbook and a package of pastel colors. Caitlin goes outside and stretches out in the comforting grass. She puts the sketchbook on her lap, and opens the box of colors because she is now ready to use them "to draw the whole complete picture."



Chapters 31-39 Analysis

Josh finally gets the put-down he so richly deserves when Emma, one of the most popular girls in school, tells him to shut up when he is verbally harassing Caitlin. Somehow, Caitlin's newly-discovered self-esteem seems to affect her relationships with her peers and the formerly icy Emma now takes her under her wing. This alone will ensure that she is soon accepted by all the other girls. The elusive "closure" that Caitlin seeks now seems within reach. Later, Josh is once again accosted by other students for plying too rough during recess with Michael, who is half his age. Their primal sense of justice offended, the other children call Josh names to express their anger. His problem is the opposite of Caitlin's. Josh is too self-confident, completely indifferent to others' feelings; Caitlin is just beginning to feel good about herself, and is thrilled that she can now understand other people's feelings. Caitlin tells her dad she would like to carve a mockingbird on Devon's chest. Once completed, they give the chest to Virginia Dare Elementary School in remembrance of Devon Smith. Caitlin feels remorse that her brother's life was cut short—for his sake, not hers. She has completed the journey to empathy and closure, and symbolically opens her color box and begins to draw her own future.



Characters

Caitlin Smith

Caitlin is a student at James Madison Elementary School when her brother, Devon, is shot and killed in a random outburst of gun violence at Thomas Jefferson High School. Caitlin has Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism that makes her unusually sensitive to noise, bright colors and a host of other external stimuli that don't bother most people. Because of the pain she experiences in the everyday world, Caitlin seeks quiet places to be alone. One of her favorites is being under the wooden chest her brother was working on at the time of his death. She is withdrawn in encounters with other students and teachers. After the shooting, she is assigned to a school psychologist who works with Caitlin to help her identify and discuss her feelings. Slowly, Caitlin evolves from fear and loathing of other people in the world to acceptance and openness. She is assisted in her journey by her teacher, the psychologist and an art teacher who takes an interest in her. Eventually, Caitlin's recovery from the death of her brother begins to affect her father so that he, too, starts to emerge from his shell of isolation and grief.

Devon Smith

Devon is Caitlin's older brother who is tragically killed in a random schoolyard shooting. Caitlin worships her older brother and is plunged into profound grief and withdrawal afterwards. Devon's life is cut short before he is able to complete construction of a wooden chest as part of his work to become an Eagle Scout. Caitlin, who has carved her name in the bottom panel of the chest, implores her father to help her complete the chest. Their progress in finishing Devon's project is a hallmark of their progress through and out of their terrible loss, and serves to bring them closer than ever before. Caitlin remembers every word of advice and experience that Devon passed along to her; they are sacred utterances of a sort, guideposts for living that both help her in her daily life and nurture her feeling of connection with her deceased brother.

Dad

Caitlin's father is named Harold Smith, and he plays a pivotal role in the story. He is, if anything, even more devastated by the death of Devon than is Caitlin. Both have been profoundly and deeply wounded. In their brokenness, they grieve and struggle to find the light. Despite her Asperger's Syndrome, Caitlin develops empathy for her father's suffering and earnestly tries to help him. Dad, on the other hand, tries to provide a structure and meaning for Caitlin's life. They recognize in each other the same suffering and are comforted in their isolation from the rest of the world. At Caitlin's prodding, slowly her father begins to stick his head out of his shell and look around at the world and people in it. He often drives his daughter to and from school, both for



companionship and to reassure her that he is still there after the infamous "day our life fell apart," as he calls it. He becomes very protective of Caitlin which seems to help her heal from her losses. When Caitlin suggests that they finish the wood chest her brother had started to build, her father is at first enthusiastic but his interest soon flags under the heavy weight of grief. Caitlin keeps bringing up the subject, and he finally takes action. Their completion of the chest both symbolizes and supports the reconstruction of their familial world until, at the end, Caitlin can say she's acquired empathy and experienced closure.

Mom

Although not a part of the narrative, Caitlin's mother is nevertheless an important figure in her life. Her mother's early death leaves Caitlin with feelings of abandonment and fear. She compensates for these feelings by forming a strong attachment to her brother, Devon, who is also tragically snatched from her life. After Devon's death, Caitlin draws strength from her mother's teachings and memory. In the small and shattered world of this 10-year-old, it is important for Caitlin to nurture living memories of both mother and brother.

Mrs. Brook

Mrs. Brook is the school counselor who does extensive work with Caitlin to help her cope with her losses and to overcome her Asperger's Syndrome. Mrs. Brook's sensitivity and compassion for Caitlin give her the courage to work on empathy, listening to other people, noticing other people, speaking appropriately with other people. Mrs. Brook is so attached to Caitlin that she calls her while on family leave so the young girl doesn't re-experience her painful fear of abandonment. Mrs. Brook also speaks very frankly and directly to Caitlin, to assure her that she is completely motivated only by a desire to help, not manipulate. She wins Caitlin's trust——no small matter——and is thus able to be effective in helping her to move through her grief to "closure."

Josh

Josh is a schoolmate of Caitlin who unfortunately personifies much of what is brutal about America. He is crass, insensitive and narcissistic. Josh has no qualms about announcing to fellow students on the playground shortly after Caitlin's brother is shot that she is "autistic," which is completely false. This hurts and angers Caitlin who runs screaming from the insult. He also shows his disdain for her by muttering "loser" under his breath while they are both waiting in the principal's office. Josh's behavior may be fear-driven; it is clearly an extension of how too many adults in society deal with profound differences——with fear, derision and dehumanizing. The fear seems to be caused by an ill-perceived threat to his security posed by Caitlin's mere existence.



Michael Schneider

Michael Schneider is the son of a teacher, Mrs. Roberta L. Schneider, who was killed in the same school shooting that killed Devon, Caitlin's brother. He is several years younger than Caitlin, but they become close friends because of their mutual losses. Caitlin comes to feel that Michael is the only kid in school in whom she can confide her feelings.

Rachel Lockwood

Rachel Lockwood is a student at Caitlin's school who thinks she hears gunshots while riding her bike past the middle school, becomes panicky and in her haste to flee on her bike falls off and bangs herself up on the pavement. She provides Caitlin with a good lesson in empathy. When Rachel asks her friends if she looks terrible after her fall, they all reassure her except Caitlin, who tells her she is "gross" and quite dreadful looking. Rachel's feelings are hurt and she cries as she runs off. Emma tells Caitlin that she shouldn't have spoken such harsh words to Rachel.

Charlie Walters

Charlie Walters is the art teacher at Virginia Dare Middle School who takes an interest in Caitlin and her artistic ability while she is still in elementary school. He tries to help her progress as an artist, and gives her drawing paper with color markers so Caitlin can become familiar with color, since all of her drawings to that point have been black and white outlines. With his encouragement and support, Caitlin finally unwraps her colors and discovers a whole new world for herself—a world that is vivid and vital and full of color. This coincides with her slow progression from the darkness of Asperger's into the full range of human awareness and feelings.

Mia

Mia is one of the girls in a clique that gathers each day in the lunch room. As Caitlin tries to reach out to others for friendship, she is rudely rebuffed by Mia who tells her she isn't welcome at their table. Later, as Emma becomes kinder to Caitlin, Mia follows suit and treats her with more respect. In the peer group-focused society of pre-adolescents acceptance is important and a snub can be devastating to anyone, but especially someone of Caitlin's delicate sensibilities.

William H.

William H. is another student at Caitlin's school who is autistic, and she tried to make a clear distinction between herself—a person with Asperger's—and William, insisting that she's not autistic. Josh callously refers to Caitlin as "autistic" at one point, which sends



her into a tearful rage. She points out that her behavior is not at all like William's and some of the other students—excluding Josh—take her words to heart. One of these is Emma, who has been rude and dismissive of Caitlin; she begins to treat her much more warmly once she understands that Caitlin is just like everyone else in having an obstacle in her life against which she must struggle.



Objects/Places

To Kill A Mockingbird

The movie, "To Kill A Mockingbird," is relevant because Scout, who is the lead character in both the book and movie, is Devon Smith's nickname for his little sister, Caitlin. She identifies with the movie so much that she sees her father as Atticus Finch, the hero of the story.

Virginia Dare Middle School

Virginia Dare Middle School is the school Caitlin will attend when she finishes elementary school. It is the school where the shooting took place and where her brother, Devon is shot to death.

Wooden chest

Devon is working on a wooden chest as part of his plan to become an Eagle Scout when he is killed, and the completion of his project by his father and sister helps them achieve "closure" while drawing closer to each other.

Virginia

Virginia—specifically the part of the state that includes the suburban Washington, D.C. area—is where the story is set. It was also in Virginia, in rural Blacksburg, where a student shooter killed or injured more than 30 people. The actual shooting is the basis and setting for Caitlin's story.

Devon's possessions

Devon's possessions—his wall posters, Scout books, baseball cards—are extremely important to his sister Caitlin and she maintains an anxious vigil over them lest they be removed, sold or destroyed.

Heart

Caitlin becomes fixated on the human heart because of her experience in the hospital after her brother's shooting. She watches Devon die while every measure of emergency care is brought to a futile effort to save his life. She learns that a bullet wound to the heart is almost always fatal, and also learns much about the structure and function of the heart. While learning about the physical organ, Caitlin is also learning about the



heart as a symbol for a person's soul or emotions. She must become as aware of her emotions, and others', in order to heal from Asperger's Syndrome and from the violent death of her brother.

Playground

The school playground is perhaps the most challenging environment for Caitlin, because that's where she must deal face-to-face with other students and the chaotic, energetic style of play appropriate to her age. With fragile boundaries because of her Asperger's Syndrome, Caitlin feels and acts defensively to the extent that she has difficulty understanding other children. This is the opportunity for her to develop some much-needed empathy, and she gently prodded in this direction by her counselor, Mrs. Brook.

Sketchbook

Art teacher Charlie Walters gives Caitlin a sketchbook and colored markers to encourage her to advance with her art. She shows considerable promise as an artist, based on her charcoal and pencil line drawings, but Walters wants to encourage her to take the next step. Not long afterwards, Caitlin sits in the warm grass on campus with her new materials, and suddenly starts using the colors for the first time. This is major step for her artistic development and for her emergence from symptoms of Asperger's.

Shower

In the aftermath of Devon's death, his grief-stricken father weeps almost constantly. He develops the habit of taking a shower whenever he feels like crying so that Caitlin won't hear or see him crying. But she quickly picks up on this behavior and knows that whenever her father is in the shower, it's because he's having a crying jag.

Hidey-hole

The hidey-hole is a spot in Devon's room where Caitlin retreats to feel safe and secure. It is a small nook between the foot of his bed and his dresser where she can withdraw from the world and be alone with her thoughts and feelings. Although it serves a purpose in the early days after her brother's death, Caitlin begins to feel safer around others and is less driven to the isolation that aggravates her Asperger's Syndrome.



Themes

Grief/closure

Loss and grief are the two principal themes. How the characters—especially Caitlin Smith and her father—respond to these losses and carry on with their lives provides the narrative and dramatic tension. For Caitlin's father, the primary issue becomes survival itself: how, and why, must he go on living after losing both his wife and son to premature death? He is so hammered by the random shooting of his son Devon at school that his powers of concentration and even rational thought become severely impaired. When Caitlin most needs her father for support, he is simply unavailable at first. Caitlin is fortunate to have a teacher and school counselor who are both compassionate and dedicated to her survival, which is complicated by the fact she suffers from Asperger's Syndrome that isolates her from others. In the initial days after the death of Devon, both Caitlin and her father cope by going deeper within themselves. Any mental health professional would cringe at the way this particular familial arrangement tends to aggravate, rather than support, the two aggrieved survivors.

But Caitlin begins to respond to her counselor, Mrs. Brook, and becomes willing to try some of her suggestions that involve getting outside herself even if for brief moments. She becomes willing to talk to other students and try to establish friendships. Many times, Caitlin runs into the cruelties of pre-adolescent group dynamics, as well as the disabling effect of Asperger's which distorts her behavior and leads her into self-defeating patterns. Caitlin draws inspiration from her deceased older brother, who always loved and supported her. She nurtures a positive image of herself by going into his room and re-experiencing the times of closeness they shared. Slowly, Caitlin begins to make a few friends. Those friendships, plus the steady direction and encouragement of her counselor, enable her to work through her grief. She then is able to turn her attention to her father, who she realizes is crippled with pain. Father and daughter rediscover and redefine their relationship through the crucible of their losses.

Empathy

The nature of Asperger's Syndrome—not unlike its more severe cousin, autism—is to lock the sufferer into their own interior world. Both resemble shyness on steroids. In Caitlin's case, her Asperger's seems to be a milder variety because she is able to listen and learn from those who would help her. As is often true for such individuals, a rich inner life can be the tradeoff for a life in reality of frustration and alienation. Mrs. Brook, Caitlin's school counselor, identifies right away that her only ticket out of the hell of Asperger's is to develop some empathy, or compassion, for the feelings and experiences of others. Then it becomes possible for the sufferer to relate to others on the same basic human level, which helps ease the isolation upon which the disability feeds and breaks the cycle of continual self-deprecation.



Caitlin is aware that her behavior sometimes is different than her intentions, that it often has the opposite effect of drawing others closer to her. But until she works with Mrs. Brook she lacks the tools to make any change in her unhappy life. By focusing Caitlin's attention on noticing what others' speech, behavior and body language reveal about their emotions, the counselor gives her the key to communication with others. As she learns and practices this new skill, Caitlin grows in awareness and empathy. Most dramatically, she empathizes with her father who is obviously suffering badly because of the death of his son. With empathy, she is able to draw closer to her father and help him through his own grief.

Healing power of art

If empathy is the key to Caitlin's victory over the isolation of Asperger's, art is the key to her heart and soul. Caitlin is already an experienced artist by the time she is ready for middle school. She loves to spend time drawing because it satisfies her yearning to create something beautiful while at the same time getting in touch with her feelings. Her art, like everything else in her life, is at the start of the book a solitary preoccupation that is intended for an audience of one—herself. Perhaps symbolic of this is the fact that Caitlin can only draw in black and white because, as she puts it, she is afraid of colors because of their fluid boundaries and power to take over the composition. She holds onto this frozen approach to drawing just as she holds tenaciously to the memories of her brother, as if she could consciously will him back to life. Fear is the driving emotion that affects every aspect of Caitlin's life. But through her interactions with her school counselor, teacher and future art teacher Caitlin is able to throw off these shackles and to grow as both artist and person.

At about the same time that Caitlin becomes more comfortable with other people by practicing empathy, she gets a jump start on her artistic growth through a gift of a sketchpad and color markers. Once her fear begins to slip away, Caitlin is able to say "yes" to color and to joyfully employ it in her drawings. Because of her advance in healing from grief and in managing her Asperger's, Caitlin is restored fully to humanity and seems to have as good—if not better—chance of a happy and successful life as any of the other children in her elementary school. Art, and love, heal her heart and carry her gently back to sanity.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the story is Caitlin's. She narrates the story as if making entries in a personal diary. She is candid and direct about what happens and how she feels, which makes her a reliable narrator in whom the reader is willing to invest belief. She not only chronicles the events of her life, but includes situations in which she feels bad about her behavior. These include making flip remarks to a student who falls off her bike when she thinks she's heard gunshots at the middle school, and occasionally saying outrageously insulting things because she lacks empathy for others' feelings. For example, she tells an adult that she doesn't hold it against him that he has tufts of hair growing in his ears. These bits are funny, but reveal how her Asperger's affects her ability to form relationships. The journal style of writing provides an appropriate venue for Caitlin to both record the events of her life and to mark her progress in managing her disability and in experiencing her profound grief.

Setting

The story is set primarily in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. that lie within the northern part of Virginia. The emotional setting is the surviving family of Devon Smith—his younger sister Caitlin and his father. By the time of Devon's murder, his mother has already been dead several years. Most of the action takes place at the elementary school attended by Caitlin, and in her home with her father. The emotional setting is the human heart as it struggles against loss, loneliness and fear.

Language and Meaning

The language employed in this book is basically standard American English, with almost no slang or foreign words or phrases. Because of the uniformity of speech and language, the reader is led to assume that all the characters are white middle-class Americans.

Structure

Although the style of writing is similar to a diary, there is nevertheless a plot structure that emerges from Caitlin's narrative with a beginning, middle and end. At the outset, the reader learns of Caitlin's struggle to cope with the murder of her brother. Her Asperger's Syndrome tends to alienate people at a time when she really needs friends for support so her struggle is two-fold: to handle her grief at the same time that she tries to overcome her disability. Progress—or backsliding—in one area is closely linked to the other. So we see that Caitlin is a finely-balanced young woman with plenty of challenges. With the help of her teachers and counselor, Caitlin advances slowly and



painfully in managing the symptoms of her Asperger's. As she tried to make progress, Caitlin also makes some dramatic and painful mistakes from which she learns. Slowly she begins to improve her coping ability by developing some empathy. The turning point is when the art teacher gives Caitlin a sketchbook and some color markers, which opens for her new door both in her drawing and in her relationships. By the end of the story, Caitlin is well-advanced in becoming a more balanced person who can care about others as much as—or more than—she cares about herself and her own struggles. She meet her difficulties, prevails and comes out the other side a stronger, more compassionate person.



Quotes

"The gray of outside is inside. Inside the living room. Inside the chest. Inside me. It's so gray that turning on a lamp is too sharp and it hurts. So the lamps are off. But it's still too bright. It should be black inside and that's what I want so I put my head under the sofa cushion where the green plaid fabric smells like Dad's sweat and Devon's socks and my popcorn and the cushion feels soft and heavy on my head and I push deeper so my shoulders and chest can get under it too and there's a weight on me that holds me down and keeps me from floating and falling and floating and falling like the bird." (Chapter 1, p.2-3)

"I turn back toward the facial expressions chart. I wonder how Mrs. Brook knows what she's feeling right now. And I wonder if I've done something wrong. Why?" (Chapter 3, p. 14)

"Now my heart is pounding loud and I want to moan but Devon says you can't moan or scream or shake your hands up and down or rock or get under a table or spin around over and over in public. Actually, you can't do most things over and over in public because that's not normal unless it's something like clapping or laughing but you have to do it only at the right times and places and Devon always tells me. Now I don't know any more." (Chapter 5, p. 27)

"I don't know why Devon couldn't get it that mother was dead. Our mother died two years before we watched Bambi so he should've known that mothers die and that they don't ever come back again no matter how much you cry or call for them. Especially if they're shot dead." (Chapter 8, p. 48)

"I turn around and I see it. My hidey-hole. The best place in the world. If there's a thunderstorm or fireworks or a lot of sirens Devon lets me sit in the hidey-hole in the corner between the foot of his bed and his dresser. He even used his Boy Scout knife to carve my name underneath his dresser where Dad can't see it and get mad." (Chapter 13, p. 77)

"We are at recess and I think Mrs. Brook might have Asperger's too because she is very persistent which is one of my skills. She is stuck on her Let's Make Friends idea even though I am making it very clear with my eyes that I am no longer interested in this conversation, All I want to talk about is closure because even though I got to be in my hidey-hole again I still didn't find closure. All Mrs. Brook ever talks about is the many ways to make friends. (Chapter 14, p. 81-82)

"Listen, Caitlin, this is important. If they're happy you can be happy with them. If someone is very sad you should be quiet with them and maybe try to cheer them up a little bit but not start out all loud and happy because that doesn't match their emotion." (Chapter 14, p. 86)



"I watch and see how he [Michael] gets his friends. He touches them but doesn't grab. He looks at the person but he doesn't get in their personal space. He also calls out to some of his friends who are playing and pull his hands toward his chest several times. Then he points at me and starts running toward me. And it's like his friends are tied to him with string because they run to him from all directions until they all end up in front of me." (Chapter 15, p. 95)

"I keep staring at Devon's chest because it makes me feel like a little bit of him is still here. Even though I know he'll never be able to teach me anything. Even though I'll never see him again and won't ever be able to look at him and say, thank you. The more I look at the chest the more I start turning it from a sharp-edged sheet into something soft." (Chapter 20, p. 128)

"Mr. Walters puts the ears on the head first then a nose then a mouth. He squints at Dad for a while before he even draws the eyes. He is very careful with the eyes. He draws them in stages from the outside in. They look sad. I stare at Dad's real eyes and I think I see the sad there too although it's easier for me to see it in the picture. The picture doesn't blink or look away." (Chapter 22, p. 138)

"Dad wipes his eyes and I do too because mine are blurry and somehow I think it's really important to see right now. What I see is that his body is shaking which means he's crying and soon his voice comes out in strange-sounding gasps that sound like he is laughing weirdly or throwing up except nothing is coming out of his mouth. Finally he covers his face with his hands and stops the noise and his body stops shaking and after he sniffs twice he takes his hands away from his face and turns his head to me." (Chapter 27, p. 162)

"I stare at the colors for a moment. There are three different shades of orange and lots of reds and yellows so you can make your own orange. And with pastels you can blur them if you want to move from one shade to another. Mr. Walters gets it. Maybe I can too. Slowly I reach out and take the colors." (Chapter 39, p. 230)



Topics for Discussion

What is the primary teaching that Caitlin carries forward from her brother, Devon?

What is the key to change for Caitlin so that she can have better relationships?

How does Caitlin deal with her profound grief over the loss of her brother and, before that, her mother?

Why does Caitlin want to carve the image of a mockingbird in her brother's wooden chest?

What happens to open the door to a deeper relationship between Caitlin and her father?

What is the defining moment when Caitlin decides she is worthy of a happy life?

What is the gesture by Caitlin and her father intended to help the school community heal from the wounds of the shooting deaths?

Different people deal with fear in different ways. How does Josh deal with fear? How does Caitlin deal with it?

What is the biggest inner resource that Caitlin taps to help her survive?

How does Caitlin's father come to realize that she cares about him as much as she loves her brother?