

Noggin Study Guide

Noggin by John Corey Whaley

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Plot Summary

“Noggin” takes a somewhat fantastic premise (the reanimation of dead human tissue), familiar from famous works of fiction like “Frankenstein”, and gives it a contemporary, very human twist. Instead of focusing on the scientific and/or moral implications of such a potentially controversial form of defeating death, the novel focuses on the struggle that the beneficiary of such an experience faces when coming back to life.

In “Noggin”, that beneficiary is 16-year-old Travis Coates. Five years before the novel begins, as he lay dying from an untreatable lymphoma (cancer), he volunteered to be part of an experimental medical procedure that would see his healthy head removed from his unhealthy body; cryogenically frozen; and at some undefined point in the future, when medical technology made it possible, reattached to the healthy body of another volunteer (one with, as it turns out, an unhealthy head). The novel begins as Travis is waking up from the surgery that attached his head to the body of fellow teenager Jeremy Pratt, who died of an inoperable brain tumor.

Chapter-by-chapter, day-by-day, circumstance-by-circumstance, Travis returns to what has become his life. Five years after his death, technology has changed; his parents have removed all traces of who he was from his bedroom; and his friends have matured and taken on new lives. For Travis, however, his experience is that of having just woken up from a nap. For him, nothing is different, in terms of his expectations of friends and family, his knowledge and experience of the world, and his experience of having a body.

By far, the most difficult adjustment Travis faces in his new life is with his friendships. As he’s building a new friendship with the funny, outspoken, quirky Hatton, his girlfriend Cate has gotten engaged, while his best friend Kyle (who confessed to the dying Travis that he was gay) has physically matured and started dating girls. Travis feels strongly that Kyle is lying to himself, and puts considerable time and energy into convincing him to tell and live the truth. At first Kyle resists, but then breaks down and confesses to his current girlfriend, and to his parents, who he really is.

His success at convincing Kyle to face the truth seems to inspire Travis to intensify his efforts at convincing Cate that they can resume their relationship to the same degree, and on the same level, as when he died. Cate, however, is committed to her fiancé, even though she still cares deeply about Travis. As Travis becomes increasingly insistent, Cate becomes increasingly angry and upset, to the point where she is unable to even accept a kiss on the cheek. Finally, Travis tells her that she has to forgive him for feeling as he does: time has not passed for him, and given him the opportunity to grow beyond his feelings.

By far the most jarring / shocking truth about the present that Travis learns is that his parents, despite pretending otherwise, have been divorced for several years, having found it impossible to get over their simultaneous grief at his “death” and the lingering hope that he will come back to life. Eventually, Travis finds a way to both understand and live with all the new situations in his life, his new understanding and perspective

symbolized and manifested by his emptying the ashes of his once fatally ill body onto the grave of the young man (Jeremy Pratt) who provided his as a substitute.



Part 1, Chapters 1 – 4

Summary

Advanced Studies in Cranial Reanimation - Protagonist Travis narrates the process of his waking up in hospital, referring to having received a diagnosis of terminal cancer (lymphoma); to having agreed to an experimental procedure for having his head removed and transplanted on another body (when medical science had advanced enough to make it possible); to waking up after the operation to do just that; and to seeing his parents happy that he's alive. He also recalls the doctor's first words: "Welcome back, Travis Coates."

Welcome Back, Travis Coates - The chapter begins with a flashback to the first time that the possibility of Travis living beyond the death sentence of his cancer came up: during a visit to Travis' home by Dr. Lloyd Saranson, who gives Travis and his reluctant parents the news that it's possible to cryogenically freeze someone's head and, eventually, find a way to connect it to some other body. Back in the present, Travis learns that it's been five years since he "died"; that in the time between his "death" and the surgery, his girlfriend Cate Conroy got engaged; that his best friend Kyle Hagler is staying away; that there's been another surgery similar to his, to a man named Lawrence Ramsey; and that his (Travis') head was transplanted onto the body of a young man named Jeremy Pratt, who died of a brain tumor, and whose family has expressed willingness to meet Travis, if he ever decides he wants to. Eventually, Travis is allowed to go home, and while he finds that much is still the same, there are still significant differences. For one, Jeremy was taller than Travis, meaning that Travis' physical perspective on certain aspects of his home (for example: the family pictures lining the staircase) is different. Travis also discovers that his mom is having a difficult time with his transition back into life, leading him to wonder in narration "how could it feel like nothing had changed at all when I wasn't me from the neck down?"

From the Neck Down – That night, Travis undresses and takes a good long look at his new body, which is fitter and more muscular than his old one (and also, he deliberately notes, better endowed in terms of his sexual organs). He describes how the strangest moment of that whole experience was realizing that the hands he now had had never done the things his old hands had done – like hold Cate, for example. The next morning, Dad reassures him while Mom tells him he's been in the news, Travis revealing in narration that he'd been watching newscasts all night for updates about him, and how he hated the use of the word "miracle" to describe what happened. When he learns that his grandmother and aunt are coming to see him, he becomes upset that neither Cate nor Kyle has come yet, and realizes that he might have to talk with Lawrence Ramsey.

A Dead Guy – Travis reaches out to Dr. Saranson, who talks him through some of his confusion and uncertainty about how to relate to his parents (who he says just need some time) and the rest of the world (which looks on him as a celebrity). Dr. Saranson



then puts him in touch with Lawrence Ramsey, who assures Travis (who has learned all about Lawrence's story from the press) that the adjustments are difficult, but necessary. They agree to help each other through whatever is ahead of them, and Travis leaves the conversation relieved at the connection, but full of further questions. His narration then refers to his contemplation of his having to go back to school, which he is not looking forward to.

Analysis

The first point to note about the novel's first few chapters is that while it sets up the somewhat fantastic premise (someone's head attached to another someone's body), establishes the primary characters and relationships, and begins explorations of its themes, there are virtually no references to the scientific elements of the situation. There is no discussion of how, for example, two entirely different nervous systems were integrated; how the thousands of variously sized blood vessels were integrated; and what kind of anti-rejection protocols, common in any form of medical transplant are involved in Travis' new life. The point is not made to suggest that such information should be there: there is the strong sense that any discussion of this aspect of Travis' situation could very easily overcome anything else in the narrative, becoming a distraction (to say the least) from what the author clearly wants to focus on: the very human experience of struggling to live a new life when the circumstances of the old life have changed so drastically, an experience which has metaphoric / life parallels that go far beyond the specifics of this particular, hypothetical procedure.

That struggle (to understand, define, and live a new present while defined by the past) is one of the work's primary themes, evident in the story and situation not only of the protagonist (Travis) but also in the stories and situations of several other characters who are, in the same way but for different reasons, struggling to reconcile what they know, and have experienced, of their pasts with what they are experiencing in a very changed present. Elements of those struggles are referred to in this opening section, Cate's engagement being the primary example (the reference to her being engaged both sets in motion what is arguably the novel's primary plot element and foreshadows important events in that plot that define Travis' journey of transformation over the course of the story). Other important foreshadowings include the references to Kyle (whose friendship with Travis is tested and challenged, throughout the narrative, in a way that mirrors Travis' relationship with Cate); the references to and conversation with Ramsey (who proves to be a valuable friend and confidante at key points later in the story); and the reference to a meeting between Travis and the family of Jeremy Pratt, which foreshadows such a meeting that takes place at the novel's climax, but in circumstances that the characters and reader don't necessarily expect.

Other important elements in this section include the references to attention paid to Travis and Ramsey by the media (a secondary but still significant element throughout the narrative, as both characters struggle to cope with all the attention) and the stylistic element of using the last lines of a chapter as the basis for the title of the chapter following.



Discussion Question 1

Is the medical procedure Travis goes through something you, in similar circumstances, would consider? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What are the metaphoric / symbolic implications of Travis' reference to his different perspective because of the height of Jeremy's body? What might the reference have to say about other aspects of Travis' experience?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Travis hates the use of the word "miracle" to describe what happened to him?

Vocabulary

impending, acute, cranial, hibernation, reanimation, cryogenics, hypothetical, scenario, expiration, muster, metallic, snobbery, circumnavigate, clavicle, physique, concave, persona, exclusive



Part 2, Chapters 5 – 9

Summary

The Return – When Travis learns that the heavy jar he found at the back of the linen closet contains the ashes of his previous body, he drops it in shocked surprise (causing his parents to scramble to clean them up) and goes outside. As he's reflecting on how he doesn't want to be the person he seems to have become, at least in the media (i.e. a role model for the young and medically hopeless), he is happy to see his buddy Kyle arrive, surprised at how much the once geeky, once chubby Kyle has matured into a slender, handsome, deep voiced man. Their reunion is initially awkward, sometimes jokey, and at one point very emotional, as they embrace. Later, as they have lunch, conversation reveals that Kyle has been talking to Cate (who's nervous about seeing Travis); that Kyle's sister Audrey will be in Travis' grade; and that Kyle has a girlfriend named Valerie. This last is the most surprising to Travis, since shortly before Travis "died", Kyle confessed that he was gay. This recollection leads Travis to realize that Kyle may have imagined his secret (i.e. his sexuality) had died with Travis, but that now, he (Kyle) was staring that secret in the face again, "scar and all".

Scar and All – Travis briefly comments on his choice to not confront Kyle with what he remembered (saying that he felt he had no right, and had other important things on his mind) and then describes how he and his parents went shopping for new clothes, a process that makes him uncomfortable because of the new styles and also brings him recognition from shoppers who, he assumes, recognize him from all the media coverage of his recovery. Eventually, he and his mom agree on a good selection, but things become tense when Mom suggests he try on a few things that hide the scar around his neck. Travis finally agrees to buy some scarves, which he says he likes – but then comments in narration on how he doesn't like appearing to others as something he's not ... even though, in a place like high school, being a celebrity has a positive side.

A Place like High School – When his Mom and Dad drop Travis off at school, they advise him to lay low and say nothing, and all the attention will die down. He manages to make it through the crowds of reporters waiting for him, but can't get past the enthusiastic welcome of the principal, other students, and a particularly uptight (but suddenly kindly) math teacher. At the end of a speech he is pushed into making in her class, a boy shouts out the word "noggin". Travis sees the humor in the new nickname. At lunch, the boy who called out "noggin" introduces himself as Hatton. As they eat, they're visited by Kyle's sister Audrey, whom Travis notes has become extremely beautiful and whom Hatton says he's interested in being with. After she's gone, Hatton's blunt questioning leads Travis to admit that he misses Cate, and that they never managed to have sex. When Mom comes to pick him up, he tells her that school was challenging but okay, and that he wishes things hadn't worked out the way they did. He comments in narration that coming back to a world when so much is simultaneously the same and different, where people had moved on so drastically, seems like a joke.



Joke's On Me – In the first part of the chapter, Travis recalls how his relationship with Cate developed, how special and good she made him feel, and how intensely close they became. He also describes how, after not responding when he said he loved her after seeing a film at the Triton Theatre, Cate painted him a picture that said it for her – a picture of the two of them alone in the theatre. Back in the present, he realizes he needs to see her and tries to get Kyle to call her for him, but he refuses, saying she needs time and that Travis shouldn't "pretend" to not know what he means. This leads Travis to make a pointed comment about pretending, which Kyle seems to not understand. He does, however, agree to tell her that Travis wants to talk with her, and the two friends say goodbye.

Goodbye, Travis – Travis recalls how, on the night before his head was removed, he said goodbyes to Kyle (who left with a joke), to Cate (who left with instructions from Travis for keeping his painting safe), and to his parents (who left with assurances of his gratitude for everything they did for him). This leads him to contemplations of how they were all pretending that there was still hope (that he would come back), and how "you can find ways to be okay with dying, but you can't fake your way through living", particularly when it comes to trying to figure out how to use someone else's body when you feel "like you don't have any damn good use for it."

Analysis

The first major point to note about this section is the reference to Kyle's sexuality – or rather, what Travis believed about Kyle's sexuality. The introduction of this subject sets an important subplot in motion: Travis' efforts to get Kyle to face / accept what he (Travis) believes, and what Kyle once claimed, was the truth. This subplot manifests a number of the book's key themes, in its exploration of what Travis sees as Kyle's pretending to be something he's not (which recurs a couple of times in this section); in its exploration of how the friendship between the two buddies changes and deepens as the result of their confrontations over this issue; and develops a particular tension between the past (what Travis believed / knew from his previous life) and present (what seems to be the reality in his new / current life). Meanwhile, the theme of pretending shows up in Travis' recollections of his friends and family just before his "death", and also manifests in a third aspect in this section.

A second major element in this section is the introduction of Hatton, who quickly becomes Travis' new best friend, in many ways a replacement in his life for Kyle. Hatton is outspoken, smart, and a little off the wall: he tends to say things that, while being somewhat outrageous, are nonetheless insightful and truthful. He is an excellent antagonist for Travis, pushing him to think about what he (Travis) is saying, doing, and thinking in ways that Travis otherwise might not. This is not to say that Travis listens: several times throughout the narrative, Hatton's insight often remains un-acted on. Ultimately, though, Hatton becomes just the kind of friend that Travis needs in this situation, and as such, becomes another active manifestation of the novel's thematic exploration of friendship.



Other important points to note here include the first appearance of Travis' ashes (which play an important role in the novel's climax, meaning that their appearance here is a significant foreshadowing); the reference to Kyle's sister Audrey (which foreshadows later incidents in which she plays a significant role); and the references to both the Triton Theatre and Cate's painting. The former is significant because it is the setting for a key moment in Travis' life / relationship with Cate, and simultaneously foreshadows later events in the narrative that take place there. The latter is significant because it (the painting) reappears later in the novel as an affirmation both of what the Travis/Cate relationship was and what it's becoming. Both the theatre and the painting serve as symbolic / metaphoric elements in the novel's exploration of the tensions between past and present.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Kyle's secret be considered a "scar"? Why might Travis' knowledge of Kyle's secrets be considered a "scar"?

Discussion Question 2

What is the third way in which the book's theme of "pretending" manifests in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What does the term "noggin" mean? Why is it relevant? Ironic? Funny? Accurate?

Vocabulary

incinerate, decapitate, nostalgic, rebellious, visor, mascara, accentuate, smirk, chaotic, privilege, succumb, defiant, luxury, astute, affirmation, efficient, procedure, botch, mortification, unkempt, paralegal



Part 3, Chapters 10 – 13

Summary

Any Damn Good Use for It – When Travis visits Dr. Saranson for a checkup, they talk about the life of Jeremy Pratt, and Travis learns that he was an ambitious skateboarder. He and Saranson also talk about Travis' conversation with Lawrence Ramsey, with Travis commenting in narration on how glad he was that Saranson didn't ask for any details. A short time later, Travis is called in to speak with the nervous new guidance counselor, Philip Franklin, who reveals that the school principal has asked him to keep an eye on Travis, that he's not quite sure how to proceed, and that Travis has been getting a lot of fan mail. Travis reads one letter, in which the writer talks about how his experience has reawakened her faith after the death of her infant child, and tells Franklin to keep the letters: he (Travis) wants nothing to do with them. He then goes into a washroom and vomits "Jeremy Pratt's guts out". When Hatton learns that Jeremy was a skateboarder, he convinces Travis to try boarding: there might be "muscle memory" at work in Jeremy's body. They borrow the board of Hatton's younger brother, and when Travis tries boarding, it feels great. He tries to convince Hatton to try, saying "you only live twice."

You Only Live Twice – Travis talks with Lawrence Ramsey about the letters, and they agree that it's weird to be considered a miracle / role model / inspiration, and that they hope that someday soon all the hoopla will die down. A few days later, on the one month anniversary of his re-animation, Travis goes to visit Cate's parents, Glen and Janice. They welcome him warmly and honestly, with both curiosity and affection - as though nothing has changed, which Travis is particularly glad of. When he explains that he really needs to see Cate, they ask him to give her more time, with Janice reminding him how much his life has improved, and suggesting he should focus on enjoying that. "Some things have changed," she says, tapping his forehead. "But not where it matters."

Where It Matters – Travis comments on how difficult school is as a result of his continually reflecting on Cate and Kyle and their new lives. He's particularly worried about Kyle seemingly pretending about his sexuality, and confides in Hatton, who suggests that he (Travis) and Kyle are in the same situation: trying to fit into the world while being outsiders. Travis then asks Kyle what's going on, and Kyle angrily tells him he's not gay, and to mind his own business. When Travis tells Hatton what happened, Hatton suggests that Travis and Kyle are both pretending, because "pretending is the only way for some people to be happy", adding that he (Hatton) thinks Travis is just pretending he's the old him again.

You Again – After a good driving instruction from his dad (who, Travis says, always found ways to stay calm and to make him laugh), they pick up his mom and go to the Triton. As the movie begins, Cate arrives with her fiancé, Turner, and Travis comes very close to saying hello to her, but seeing the affection between them keeps him from doing so. After the film, to which he doesn't pay much attention, he and his parents wait



for Cate and Turner to leave, Travis commenting in narration on how he realized that ultimately, the reason he agreed to the surgery, the reason he wanted to come back, was to be with her ... and that he didn't think it was unreasonable for him to say "thank you for still being here". 600 / 2000

Analysis

Travis' emerging connection to the life of Jeremy Pratt is an interesting development, one that, in all likelihood, answers a question in the reader's mind that's been lingering since the novel began: how will the head and the body actually get along? It's also interesting because the skateboarding moment, as portrayed here, foreshadows two key events: a very significant moment later in the narrative when Jeremy's body does NOT behave in the way Travis wants it to; and a moment very late in the narrative, close to its climax, in which a new and different kind of connection to Jeremy's body is established.

Other important elements include Travis' visit to Cate's parents and the reference to Philip Franklin and the introduction of the letters. The latter adds a level of pressure to Travis' situation, with the appearances of both – the letters and the pressure – foreshadowing events later in the narrative where Travis once again encounters both the letters and their implications for how he is seen in the world. There are also further developments in the "Kyle's Sexuality" subplot (which is itself a manifestation of two key themes: pretending and the nature/value of friendship), which takes an interesting twist when Hatton suggests that Kyle isn't the only one who's pretending. It could be argued that Hatton is wrong, in that Travis isn't pretending, but only needs to believe so desperately. It's more likely, however, that the observant and wise Hatton is right, and that Travis – as the narrative goes on to indicate – is, in fact, pretending that it's more possible for the past to equal the present than it actually is.

Finally, there is Travis' return to the Triton Theatre which is particularly significant, because it's the first time Travis actually sees both the present day Cate (as opposed to the Cate from the past, whom he keeps alive in his imagination) and her fiancé (Turner), who plays an important role in the conflict between Cate and Travis over whether they will ever resume their relationship as it was.

Discussion Question 1

Why might the letter writer in Chapter 10 see Travis' "return to life" as an indication of hope? What is the parallel between her dead daughter (who will not be coming back to life) and Travis' situation?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance, for both Travis and the story so far, of the welcome he receives from Cate's parents?



Discussion Question 3

Travis' comment that "you only live twice" is a comic paraphrase of what popular saying? Why is Travis' paraphrase significant? What is the twist in meaning at play?

Vocabulary

bane, excruciating, exception, abomination, immune, unnatural, normalcy



Part 4, Chapters 14 - 18

Summary

Thank You – Travis comments on how he’s not looking forward to Thanksgiving, the first family occasion on which he’ll be reunited with all his aunts, uncles, and cousins. Much to his surprise, after some initial awkwardness, things go well with all the cousins, until the moment at dinner when his grandmother makes a toast to him, and everyone has “the same expression, one of those sad-but-happy ones that you see when there’s a good memory or joke shared in a eulogy or when your grandparents talk about their childhoods.” He then realizes how unique a place each person has in the lives of the people around them and comments on how his grandmother tells him that she always knew he’d “come back”.

Come Back – Back at school after the holiday, Travis reconnects with Hatton, who asks whether it’s likely that he (Hatton) could ever ask Audrey out. Travis tells him it’s not likely, and then asks for Hatton’s help in winning Cate back, saying that once they actually meet again, she’ll realize that they’re meant to be together. Hatton, in turn, says that THAT’S not too likely, but agrees to help. Travis comments in narration that “the part of him that found its way back would always be incomplete without her”, reiterating his determination to “make it happen, or ... die again trying.”

Dying Again Trying – That night, Travis and Hatton plan to go find Cate, convincing Travis’ very reluctant mother to let them borrow her car (Travis commenting in narration on how odd it is that his dad is now constantly working late, but thinking to himself that it doesn’t mean he – his dad – is doing the stereotypical thing and having an affair). After ensuring that Hatton can drive, insisting they text every half hour, and setting a curfew, Travis’ mom lets them go. At the bar (a karaoke club), Travis finds the atmosphere very uncomfortable and can’t find Cate. Hatton suggests that Travis go up on stage and sing her a love song.

Singing Her a Love Song – Hatton pushes Travis up on stage, selects a song, and gets the music going. Travis starts singing, commenting in narration that he pretty much had no choice. Once he starts, he becomes less nervous, realizes that other people have started to sing along ... and then sees Cate, who seems both “amazed and terrified”. When she runs out, he drops the microphone and follows her, commenting that seeing her again “had nearly killed [him] all over again”. The doorkeeper tells him she went across the street, sees she’s been crying, and gestures to ask whether she’s comfortable talking to him. She nods, and he goes in, commenting in narration that he can see her breathing as he walks toward her.

Toward Her – Face-to-face with Travis for the first time since he came back, Cate cries her way through their conversation. She talks about how strange it is for her to be sitting across from him again, how painful it’s been for her to try to figure out what to say, and how much she regrets how they said goodbye before he “died”. She touches the scar



around his neck, commenting that what happened is “impossible”. Travis takes her hand, and tells her that he believes they’re meant to be together. She reminds him that she’s engaged, and he says he can forgive her for that. She gets up and goes, promising to call. Travis then tracks down Hatton, who joins him at the restaurant and buys him something to eat, listening quietly as Travis speaks insistently about his belief that Cate coming back to him is inevitable, and that the fiancé “had to go ... there was no doubt in [his] mind.”

Analysis

As Travis continues his struggle to find his way into his new life (thematic element one in this section), he continues to try to live as though the past is the present (thematic element two). His friendship with Hatton (thematic element three) deepens and becomes more open as the result of their parallel desires for apparently unattainable women, and their mutual challenging of each other to face the truth. This is the fourth thematic development in this section, given that both Hatton and Travis are, to one degree or another, pretending that the apparently impossible is, in fact, possible.

In addition to this section’s multi-faceted thematic developments, there are some important foreshadowings. The first is Hatton’s question about asking Audrey on a date, which foreshadows an important, if secondary, element in the play’s climax. The second, and more significant, is the reference to Travis’ suspicions about his father’s absences, which foreshadows later references to the surprising truth about what those absences actually mean. Finally, there is the reference to Cate’s fiancé, which foreshadows the moment several chapters on when Travis and Turner (Cate’s fiancé) actually meet.

Ultimately, the most important element of this section is the appearance of Cate – or, more specifically, the moment at which she and Travis meet. This takes place about a third of the way through the narrative, and sets in motion a chain of events that are similar in action (i.e. Travis trying to win Cate back and failing) but steadily intensifying in terms of the needs that motivate the action (i.e. Travis’ need to bring the past with Cate into the present, Cate’s need to keep the past with Travis in the past). The introduction of this plot element (i.e. movement / intensification of action) is also the most significant manifestation IN action of the plot’s thematic interests in living a changed life and the tension between past and present. It is also the primary narrative element in the book’s thematic exploration of obsession and its dangers: the threat implied in the last line of the section is clear.

Discussion Question 1

Who are some of the people who hold "unique" places in your life? Discuss specifically what you would miss if that person was no longer IN your life.



Discussion Question 2

What experiences in your own life might be seen as similar to what's happening for Travis (i.e. determined to make something happen that doesn't seem likely)? How understandable / relatable is that aspect of Travis' situation to you?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Cate's general reaction to Travis' situation, and her reaction in the situation at the end of this section. What is your opinion on how she handles it? What might you do differently?

Vocabulary

inevitable, familiarity, recliner, waft, ravenous, nutrients, eulogy, contagious, avert, grovel, stellar, perspective, interrogate, humiliation, profuse, dispenser, instinctive



Part 5, Chapters 19 – 22

Summary

Doubt in my Mind – Even though they get back to Travis' well before curfew, Travis' mom insists that Hatton stay the night. As Travis and Hatton are getting ready to go to sleep, Travis comments that it feels like his life with Cate is what got “cut off” when he had his surgery. The next night, Cate calls him, saying that what he did at the karaoke bar and afterwards was immature and frightening, but that she understands why he did it. She comments that she's an adult now and makes decisions in an adult way, adding that she hopes he can do the same, that she still loves him, and that they can still be friends. She also says that the way things are now is “different and incredible and kind of sad”, leading Travis to believe that she wishes she hadn't moved on, and that his coming back was going to change her life again. “There was no hiding from it.”

Hiding from It – In the first part of the chapter, Travis recalls how he and Cate once, just before one of Travis' chemotherapy treatments, watched a meteor shower from his rooftop. He recalls how Cate commented that billions of small meteors fell to earth each day, but most were too small to notice. Travis comments on how sad it is that they “just disappear like that”, adding that he realized in the moment afterwards that they were thinking the same thing. Back in the present, after hearing nothing from Cate for two weeks, even in response to his phone calls and texts, he hides in the bathroom and cries. The next day, Hatton encourages him to think about other girls, but he refuses. This, in turn, leads Travis to reflect on how much his friendship with Hatton is becoming like his friendship with Kyle, and to realize how much he (Travis) is still living in the past without knowing how to move into the future ... trying to do “the impossible”.

The Impossible – Travis makes the effort to reconnect with Kyle, and after the first few minutes of an awkward telephone conversation, he (Travis) is relieved when their joking style of conversation returns. They agree to go to a concert / party at Kyle's university, and on the night of the concert, run into Cate, who's there with a friend. They decide, on the spur of the moment, to go out for burgers, and return to the restaurant where they spent a lot of time together before Travis “died”. Conversation is sometimes playful and sometimes awkward, particularly when Cate comments that she's not painting anymore and Kyle announces that he's moving in with his girlfriend. Later, while Cate is in the washroom, Kyle tells Travis to back off from Cate – that she's freaked out by how things are going between them, particularly after the karaoke night. Kyle also says that Travis can't expect people to be the same as they were before he “died”. Later, after dropping Cate off, Travis can't keep a rein on his feelings or words any more, and tells Kyle that the reason he (Travis) liked him so much was that he was “never full of shit about anything”, and adds that “if I can be the head kid, then you can be his best friend who happens to be gay ... it's that easy.”

It's That Easy – Travis and Cate have a series of phone conversations during which Cate becomes more and more comfortable both talking with Travis and talking about



her past – particularly, her art. Eventually, they agree to see each other again, as friends, with Travis suggesting that she talk things over with Turner before they make final plans. Cate agrees. A short time later, Kyle visits, and tearfully acknowledges that Travis was right: he's gay, and has been trying to cover it up by dating girls. He confesses how bad he's been feeling about it, how much he wanted his gayness to go away, and how he's planning to tell his parents the truth. Afterwards, Travis wonders about how time and thought and people's feelings interact, and how simultaneously simple and complicated everything is.

Analysis

In this section, there are interesting developments in the narrative and thematic exploration of the tension between past and present. On the one hand, the story proves Travis right: his insistence that Kyle be as honest as he was before he (Travis) died pays off, and Kyle confesses that the truth he hinted at before is, in fact, the truth now. In other words, in this case, the past continues in the present. On the other hand, the story continues to suggest that Travis is also wrong: in spite of his best efforts and his obsessive belief, he is getting no further to winning Cate back. In other words, in THIS case, the past no longer continues in the present. It could be argued that Travis' success in the former instance (i.e. in the situation with Kyle) inspires / triggers him to continue his efforts with Cate, in the hope that she'll come around in the same way as Kyle did. It could also be argued, however, that at this point in the narrative, Travis' obsession with winning Cate back (a secondary thematic development) has a life of its own, and there is nothing that can influence it either way. On another level, it's important to note that Kyle's confession is the first of a series of confessions made by characters who discover, like Kyle, that pretending is neither comfortable nor admirable, and who make confessions of their own. This makes Kyle's revelation a foreshadowing of revelations to come.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to the meteor shower and the reference to Cate no longer painting. Because a piece of Cate's work is special to Travis, this revelation suggests again, to him and to the reader, that she has thoroughly moved on after his death, and that he's got his work cut out for him if he still intends to win her back.

Discussion Question 1

Go through the chapter endings/titles and discuss how the repetitions and/or variations in each explore different meanings of the ideas to which they refer. How, for example, do the different variations reflect Travis' experiences, or his interpretations of those experiences?



Discussion Question 2

What other experience(s) in the narrative might the comment about the disappearing meteors be referring to? What incident(s) does it metaphorically represent?

Discussion Question 3

How does the revelation of Kyle's true sexuality relate to the novel's thematic interest in pretending?

Vocabulary

curfew, flimsy, psychoanalysis, scenario, archaic, nonchalant, planetarium, maniac, meteoroid, priority, hilarious, patchouli, fedora, saunter, enthusiasm, capacity, intrude, impromptu, samurai, rationalize, egomaniac, familiarity



Part 6, Chapters 23 – 25

Summary

Too Complicated To Explain – Travis and Cate go out to a new coffee bar, with Cate's references to the few boyfriends she had since Travis' "death" leading him to a feeling of pride that she managed to get on with her life, and a desire in them both to visit the park where they used to hang out. While there, conversation seems so casual and so comfortable that Travis feels they can really be friends – at least, he thinks, until they turn into something more. A few days later, Cate surprises Travis with a visit to the art gallery to see the original of a painting that Travis had on a poster in his old bedroom – "The Great Wave off Kanagawa", a depiction of a small, frail-looking boat about to be swamped by a huge wave. Travis is moved to tears, admitting to Cate that the poster was taken out of his room by his parents when he "died". This leads her to promise to buy him another copy of the poster. A few days later, they go out to the park again, where they reminisce about the time that Travis talked Cate into watching a horror film with him, sitting on two seats reclaimed from the about-to-be-demolished Triton Theatre, seats which, like the poster, have long since disappeared. While the recollections are happy, the feelings that remain in their wake, at least for Travis, are not. The next day, Travis runs into Audrey (Kyle's sister) at school, and she thanks him for being a good friend to Kyle. This makes Travis wonder if, by dying, he let all his friends down, imagining – for example – that if he hadn't died, Kyle wouldn't have had to spend five years pretending to not be gay. "Dying," he thinks, "may not have been the best decision [he] ever made."

The Best Decision I Ever Made – Feeling good about having both Cate and Kyle back in his life, Travis makes plans to introduce them both to Hatton, Kyle first. When Travis talks to him on the phone, Kyle tries to talk him out of spending too much time with Cate, but Travis protests that all he wants is to be friends with her. Kyle doesn't quite believe him, but lets it go in favor of making plans to hang out with Hatton at Arnie's Arcade, where he and Kyle used to hang out. When Kyle and Hatton meet, Hatton's off-beat, aggressive sense of humor wins Kyle over, and they're soon playing games like old friends. Travis, meanwhile, finds his way into the Retro Room, where his favorite game (Space Invaders) is now stored. He tries to play, but his new hands don't work as well as his old ones, and he doesn't make a good score. But then he sees his old high score still stands, and he realizes what he has to do.

What I Had To Do – Travis puts more money into the arcade game, and more, and more. As he works up a sweat, desperate to beat his old high score, first Kyle then Hatton try to calm him down, without success. Eventually, Kyle calls Cate, who comes down to the arcade and convinces Travis to leave. While in the car, Travis has a full blown panic attack, but Cate calls him down, explaining afterwards that she used to have them as well. Back at his house, Travis asks her to keep him company, and she agrees, but makes it clear she doesn't want him getting the wrong idea. This makes him



reflect bitterly on how much he wants things to be back the way they were, and how he feels like he's running out of time for that to happen.

Analysis

There are several important elements in this section. The first is the introduction of two important aspects of Travis' past, the "Great Wave" print and the chairs from the theatre. Both are aspects of his past life that he misses, and both return later in the narrative, meaning that the references to them here are also important pieces of foreshadowing. The second important element is related to the meetings between Hatton and Travis' closest friends from the past, Kyle and Cate. Here, the narrative looks at a possibility that Travis doesn't seem interested in / capable of fully understanding, or accepting: the idea that the past and the present can interact healthily, safely, and well.

There is, however, a powerful contrast to this aspect of the narrative: the sequence in which Travis finds himself desperate to repeat his high score on the arcade game. This incident is notable for several reasons. First: it marks the first occasion on which Jeremy Pratt's body doesn't do what Travis wants it to do. His body is rebelling against his mind – or, to look at it another way, the present / new life is rebelling against the past / old life. The second reason this incident is important is that it is the most intense manifestation, to this point in the narrative, of the narrative's thematic interest in obsession and its dangers. A related point is how this incident parallels and/or foreshadows the intensification of his determination to win back Cate, an aspect of his narrative intention to, and the book's thematic interest in, defining the present in terms of the past. Finally, the arcade incident foreshadows the events / circumstances in the book's epilogue, which portrays Travis at the end of one aspect of his journey, and at the beginning of another.

All that said, an interesting aspect to Travis' reaction to his overall situation (i.e. dying / coming back to life) emerges in his reflections on how Kyle's life might have changed if he hadn't chosen to die. While it's certainly true that Kyle's situation might have been different if Travis had LIVED (that is: Kyle might have been more comfortable being gay, having a living friend who cared for him and respected him as he was), it's not necessarily true that Travis' choice to die made the difference that Travis thinks it does. The thing is that Travis was going to die ANYWAY, which is perhaps why Kyle confessed the truth in the first place – a dead person is the ultimate in good secret keepers. To look at it another way: here Travis blames himself for something that's not his fault / responsibility, a mental perspective on his situation that, it could be argued, goes towards creating a sense that Travis, as Cate seems to be slipping further and further away from him, is himself slipping into self-pity.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Audrey say Travis has been a good friend to Kyle? What has Travis done to earn being called that? Do you agree with her assessment? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

What aspect of the narrative – what experiences, what situations, what circumstances – might be metaphorically represented by “The Great Wave” print?

Discussion Question 3

The game “Space Invaders” asks the player to destroy ever-advancing, ever-increasing ranks of alien invaders before s/he himself is destroyed. What experiences in Travis’ life, either before his “death” or after his “return to life”, might this game suggest or evoke? What thematic aspect of the book might the game suggest or evoke?

Vocabulary

demented, acoustic, colonnade, intersect, linoleum, prolong, habitat, paraphrase, regurgitate, squeamish, unscathed, inseparable, demeanor, futuristic, annihilate, tantrum, hyperventilate



Part 7, Chapters 26 – 28

Summary

Out of Time – Travis recalls one of the best days he had in his previous life, a few days before his “death”. Having been brought to the Saranson Centre to prepare for the surgery Travis, his family and friends, with the help of nurses and staff, celebrate all the holidays of the year in one day – Halloween, Christmas, New Year’s, Valentine’s Day and Easter. He speaks of how glad he was he got to live fully before the lights got turned out.

The Lights – The narrative shifts back to the present, to the aftermath of Cate’s pulling Travis out of the arcade. They wake up together on a couch at Travis’s, having been covered by a blanket. As they go out to Cate’s car, they notice that Travis’ dad’s car is gone, leading Travis to wonder whether he’s having an affair and Cate to assure him that his dad’s not like that. As she’s leaving, Travis leans in and kisses Cate’s cheek, and they both notice that Travis is sexually aroused – or, as Travis puts it, that Jeremy Pratt loves her too. A bit embarrassed, Cate promises to get in touch after Christmas, and they part. On Christmas Eve, Travis learns that Kyle has moved back in with his parents (because his roommate at college got uncomfortable when Kyle revealed his sexuality) and that Audrey is considering breaking up with her very conservative Christian boyfriend Matt, who she says has been insisting that Kyle needs to be prayed for. Travis then describes how his parents do their best to make Christmas just the way it always was before Travis “died”, even down to the pancakes shaped like Santa Claus heads (and yes, Travis comments in narration, he noticed the irony). Among Travis’ gifts is a thousand dollars-worth of accumulated cash presents from his dad. After Christmas dinner, Hatton and Kyle arrive and take Travis on a secret mission – to retrieve the movie theatre seats that had been sold after Travis’ death. He is moved almost to tears, becoming even more so when the seats are restored to their former place in his room. Realizing he didn’t get Christmas presents for either of his friends, he looks in the hall closet until he finds his ashes. He goes back into the bedroom and asks his friends if they want to see something weird.

Something Weird – When Kyle and Hatton see the ashes, Travis sees their negative, creeped-out reaction as a desire to get those ashes, that symbol of Travis’ life and death, out of his life. Hatton comes up with a plan to replace them with the ashes of animals, cremated at his father’s veterinary practice. Travis, meanwhile, indicates in narration that up until that moment, he hadn’t thought of the ashes in the same way as he thought about the movie seats and other remnants of his previous life, and adds that sometimes it takes good friends to make a person see the truth about themselves. Shortly afterwards, Cate returns and takes Travis out for a talk, telling him that there can be no repeats of what happened before Christmas, and that Turner wants to meet him before they (Cate and Travis) spend any more time together. Travis protests that it’s not going to change how he feels, but Cate insists. Travis agrees. When Cate drives him home, they notice Travis’ dad pulling out of the driveway, which Travis says is unusual:



it's late in the evening. With Cate driving, they follow him to an apartment building, where he takes out a key and enters one of the apartments. Travis sees this as proof his dad is indeed having an affair, and as Cate drives him home, he breaks down and cries, "Jeremy Pratt's heart breaking."

Analysis

Chapter 26, "Out of Time", is arguably one of the most moving chapters in the book, as it brings to life the simultaneous joy and grieving fatalism of Travis' life, and arguably of life in general. There is the sense here that the author is using this chapter to create a powerful and vivid sense of contrast to the rest of the book: while Travis, throughout much of the narrative, is reacting to his life because of what it is not, this chapter celebrates, in highly concentrated form, the life that IS. The lesson here seems to be celebrate what you have when you have it: in all likelihood, it's going to be gone before you know it. It's important to note, however, that this is not necessarily an overall theme of the book: the narrative spends relatively little time exploring things in his present life that Travis DOES have to celebrate, but rather focuses – as Travis does himself – on what he has to both grieve and try to hold onto.

It's also interesting and important to note that in this section, the novel juxtaposes moments of intense joy (the flashback to the special day, the retrieval of the movie seats) with a moment of intense present-day grief, fear, and anger. This is Travis' discovery of what looks like his father's second life, a situation that has been foreshadowed / hinted at several times throughout the narrative and which, in subsequent chapters, leads to surprising revelations about what that second life actually involves. Other important foreshadowings in this section include Hatton's plan to dispose of Travis' ashes (a plan that comes to fruition, with a twist of its own, at the narrative's climax) and the reference to Travis and Turner meeting (which foreshadows their actual meeting, under complicated circumstances, in the following section). Also important are the reference to the thousand dollar Christmas gift (for which, the narrative reveals, Travis develops some surprising plans) and the reference to Audrey's boyfriend Matt, who reappears later in the narrative and challenges Travis to rethink his perspectives on his own "second life" in yet another way.

One last significant element in this section is the in-passing reference to the consequences experienced by Kyle as a result of his deciding to no longer pretend he is something he is not. This adds another aspect / facet to the novel's thematic interest in pretending, in that the reference suggests that while there may be consequences to pretending, there are also consequences to NOT pretending. This side of the theme is indirectly foreshadowed by Travis' discovery of his father's second life: when Travis discovers the truth of that life, he and his parents both must face similar consequences to what Kyle experiences here.



Discussion Question 1

What would your year in a day look like? Follow the pattern of days set forth by Travis' family and friends, and add some of your own - the ones you think are unique to your family.

Discussion Question 2

In consideration of the book's exploration of an apparent secondary theme – enjoying the pleasures of life while you have them – consider and discuss the pleasures / positives in YOUR life that you would miss if you were no longer able to have them. Consider your experiences of holidays, such as Travis does here, but also consider non-holiday events, non-“special occasion” events. What aspects of your day-to-day life do you think ought to be / could be celebrated for the joys that they are?

Discussion Question 3

In this section, Kyle faces some seemingly unpleasant consequences for making the choice to no longer pretend he is something he is not – in other words, when he chooses to face / live the truth. What is your experience of facing consequences of telling / living your truth? How easy was it to live with those consequences? How difficult did awareness of those potential consequences make your decision?

Vocabulary

metallic, unison, haphazard, hooligan, simultaneous, cringe, generic



Part 8, Chapters 29 – 31

Summary

Heart Breaking – Travis tries to get through a normal day at school, but finds he can't concentrate. At lunch, Hatton tries to get him involved by talking about possibilities for disposing of his (Travis') ashes, but Travis is too preoccupied. They're also distracted by an invitation from Audrey's Christian boyfriend, Matt Braynard, to meet with him and his Christian Youth Club after school that day. Travis convinces Hatton to skip class with him, calls Kyle for a ride, and the three of them go to the apartment that Travis saw his dad go into. Travis tells his friends what he saw, and then goes up to confront his dad. He learns that his dad and mom have been divorced for about three years; that they tried everything they could to stay together but are still good friends; and that they wanted to tell Travis the truth as soon as he woke up but Dr. Saranson convinced them to wait until Travis was well on the road to recovery. Dad also shows Travis the apartment's second bedroom, which contains everything that was in Travis' old room: bed, curtains, clothes, and the "Great Wave" poster. As Travis cries, Dad explains that he (Dad) just could not let go of Travis' previous life, that keeping his room intact was the only way he could survive, and that in addition to everything else, he's lost his job to a younger competitor. As Travis leaves, "there [is] no emotional embrace or anything", but no anger either. Back in Kyle's car, Hatton asks if everything is okay. Travis says "Everything is not okay."

Everything is not Okay – When he gets home, Travis discovers that his dad had already called his mom to let her know what happened. Mom then explains her perspective to Travis, who is angry about how much everyone lied to him. She explains that at first she and his dad were determined to stay together long enough to see Travis come back, but that over time, the possibility of that happening seemed increasingly remote. She adds that a therapist told them that unless they gave themselves and each other permission to move on, they would be stuck in grieving / mourning mode forever. They just, she, says, couldn't "sync back up" after he'd gone. This conversation leads Travis to realize, and to comment in narration, that in his decision to try to come back, he'd been really selfish: he'd been pretending to do it for them, but in fact it was all for him.

All for Me – That night, Travis has difficulty sleeping, imagining his parents and what they went through. Meanwhile, his attempts to contact Cate trigger no response, and he goes to school still angry about what his parents and family did. That afternoon, Matt convinces him and Hatton to finally see what the Christian Youth Group has done: sort all Travis' fan mail. Matt adds that he and the group will keep sorting it until Travis is ready to look at it all, and then, at the end of the gathering, convinces Travis to take just one box, which he does, putting it deep into his closet. Afterwards, Travis calls Lawrence Ramsey and tells him everything that's happened, talking about how confusing it's all been and how he keeps wishing everything could go back to the way it was. Ramsey speaks firmly to him about how that's impossible – about how friends and family had to move on as best they could, how he and Travis had cheated the thing that



just about everyone else is afraid of, and that they've got the responsibility to prove that the opportunity for a second life hadn't been wasted on them. After the conversation finishes, Travis realizes that there might be a day, at some point down the road, when he could just start living without second guessing everything.

Analysis

The most significant element of this section is Travis' discovery of the truth about his parents' situation. Two of the book's major themes manifest here: its emphasis on pretending (which Travis' mom and dad are finally able to stop doing), and its emphasis on the tensions between the past and the present, with Travis discovering once again that the past has not continued into the present in the way that he would like. An important element to note here is that in spite of having this aspect of his experience shown to him yet again, Travis fails to fully absorb it: as forthcoming sections reveal, he becomes even more insistent on bringing his past with Cate into the present. It's also important to note, however, that once again the novel juxtaposes a failure of the past/present continuum with an example of how the past HAS continued into the present. This is Travis' discovery that his old bedroom (including the "Great Wave" print) is almost entirely intact but just in a different place juxtaposed with, as noted above, the discovery of the truth about his parents. There is the sense here that both these events – the failure / success of the past to continue into the present – make Travis even more desperate for what is probably the most IMPORTANT aspect of his past (his relationship with Cate) to do something that some parts of his past have been able to do and other parts of his past have not.

Other significant elements in this section include Travis' sense of guilt / responsibility for what happened to his parents after his "death" (which deepens a similar response to the situations of other characters earlier in the narrative); the encounter with what Matt and the Christian Youth Group have done with the letters (which leads into Travis' experience with at least one of those letters in the following section); and the conversation with Lawrence Ramsey. This is perhaps as interesting for what it doesn't do as for what it does: Lawrence does speak an important truth to Travis (i.e. about the need to recognize and understand what had to happen for his friends and family) that Travis and the novel eventually explore, but speaks a second truth that, like many of the other larger philosophical questions raised by the narrative, is somewhat under-explored. This is Ramsey's suggestion that he and Travis have a responsibility to prove that their second lives are not being wasted.

It could be argued that this idea is embedded in the main story: that Travis, by focusing so intensely and thoroughly on trying to bring the past into the present, is doing exactly what Ramsey is suggesting, wasting a new opportunity. It therefore follows, this argument goes, that to explore the theme more explicitly is unnecessary. It could also be argued that bit by bit, disappointment by disappointment, reality by reality, Travis is discovering the truth at the core of Ramsey's contention, and again there is no need to develop it more explicitly. Finally, it could be argued that by not focusing on philosophical (and/or scientific) elements of Travis' experience, the author is engaging



his target audience (i.e. readers Travis' age) with story elements and ideas with less potential to trigger disengagement. While this last, and indeed all three, arguments are valid, there is the lingering sense that potentially important facets of the story, potentially intriguing and challenging aspects of its morality and philosophy, could have added uniqueness, humanity, and/or weight to a story that, in many ways, is not that different from a basic teenaged "romance gone wrong" story.

Discussion Question 1

How do you respond / react to the choice made by Travis' dad re: the bedroom? Is it understandable? Weird?

Discussion Question 2

What is the most likely reason that Travis is so preoccupied at the beginning of this section?

Discussion Question 3

Do you agree or disagree with Travis' belief that his decision to come back was primarily selfish? Why or why not? Do you think he's right to blame himself for how his decision affected others (Cate? Kyle? His parents?) Again, why or why not?

Vocabulary

equation, shrivel, bizarre, memorialize, incinerate, replicate, astonish, perpetual, charade, piqued, unison



Part 9, Chapters 32 – 34

Summary

No Questions Asked – When Travis finally hears from Cate again, they make arrangements to meet for coffee – and for Cate to bring Turner. Travis then asks Hatton to give him a ride, confessing that he’s planning to ask Cate to marry him and asking Hatton to take him to a jewelry store to pick out an engagement ring for Cate which, Travis adds, he plans to pay for with the money he got from his dad for Christmas. Later, after Travis has bought a ring, Hatton and Kyle confront him about the foolishness of what he’s about to do. When Travis tries to defend himself by saying it’s something he has to do, Kyle angrily reminds him that everyone would like to redo their pasts, but it’s just not possible. Travis protests that he has to have come back for SOME reason, but Kyle tells him that his (Travis’) life is good for reasons other than Cate. All he has to do is open his eyes.

Open Your Eyes – Travis calls Lawrence Ramsey for advice on what to do about his situation with Cate, but finds the conversation hijacked by Lawrence’s excited retelling of how meeting the family of the man who donated his body for his (Lawrence’s) procedure has made things much more positive. Later, Hatton drops Travis and the ring off at the coffee shop where he’s meeting Cate and Turner, saying he’ll wait in the car. Travis goes in and sees Cate and Turner in a corner booth. When he joins them, conversation is fairly relaxed, as Turner seems honest, curious, and friendly, making Travis comment in narration that it was hard for him to be resentful of him (Turner). When Turner is off getting a refill of his coffee, Travis takes out the ring and begins to propose to Cate. Cate tries to stop him, but he continues. Turner returns, and Travis explains what’s going on. At first Turner is amused, but then becomes angry. Travis’ temper erupts: he punches Turner in the face and rushes out. Hatton drives him home and listens as Travis angrily says he doesn’t know how to keep going, how to even exist. Hatton comments that he’s no different than anyone else – that everyone is just “meandering”.

Just Me and a Ring – For two weeks, Travis ignores Cate’s frequent texts and voice mail messages. He becomes increasingly depressed, in spite of finding a degree of comfort sleeping in his old bed amongst his old things in the “Travis Room” at his dad’s apartment. The positive effect of that experience, however, fades quickly, and Travis ends up just going through the motions at school and staying in bed for increasing amounts of time. At one point his mom tries to get him moving by telling him that the “him” who was sick could probably “kick his sorry ass.” Travis sees that she’s right, gets out of bed, and sees the box of letters he brought home. He starts looking through them, but stops after finding one that’s extremely negative and one that’s extremely positive, commenting in narration that it will never be possible for him to be what everyone expects him to be. A week or so later, Hatton and Kyle show up with a bag of cat ashes from Hatton’s dad’s vet clinic, and much to Travis’ disgust, they exchange



them for his. They also say they've invited Cate to join them for the next phase of Travis' letting go of the past, and then tell him they've found Jeremy Pratt.

Analysis

Following up on, and intensifying, the heightened narrative energy of the previous section (in which Travis discovered the truth about his parents), this section contains an event that might be effectively described as a pre-climax. This is the confrontation between Travis and Turner, which is not the climax of the novel and/or of Travis' journey of transformation – that takes place in the following, final section – but IS the climax of a particular ASPECT of that journey of transformation: Travis' ongoing struggle to win Cate back, in that it's the most intense, the most direct, and the most confrontational effort he makes to realize this particular goal. Here it's interesting to note how the story's overall conflict between past and present in this section actually takes physical form: with both the engagement ring and his fists (or rather, Jeremy' Pratt's fists), Travis tries to force the present into the shape of the past he is so desperately clinging to. He discovers, however, that in the same way as all his other efforts have failed, this one fails as well: Cate has moved on, and as a result of the encounter in the coffee shop that proves that, Travis is able to do what he needs to do at the novel's climax and begin to make the important changes he needs to make in order to move on himself. Meanwhile, the events of the climax are further foreshadowed by the reference made by Lawrence Ramsey to his encounter with his donor body's family, and by Hatton's appearance with the cat ashes, both of which play key roles in defining the circumstances and action of the climax.

One final noteworthy point in this section: the title of Chapter 34, and its relationship to the end of Chapter 33. As noted throughout this analysis, there are clear, if sometimes indirect and/or multi-faceted, relationships between the words at the end of a chapter and the title of the next. The link between the end of Chapter 33 and the beginning of Chapter 34 is the only example in this convention / practice / authorial choice in which the ending word / phrase is both dismantled and punned upon. Is this particular connection a bad choice? Is it particularly clever? "Meandering" seems very different in essential quality (i.e. loose, unfocused, indirect) from how Travis has behaved towards Cate to this point: "me and a ring", while not a letter-for-letter dissection of "meandering", has a noteworthy sense of contrast in terms of essential quality: Travis has been tight, focused, and quite direct in terms of what he's trying to get from Cate. The question is what the author is trying to say / do with this unique, one-off variation on the choices made throughout the narrative?

Discussion Question 1

What are your thoughts / opinions about Turner's reaction to Travis' proposal? Is it credible? Understandable? Unbelievable? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Which of the book's other thematic elements is dramatized / brought to a climax by the confrontation in the coffee shop?

Discussion Question 3

Both Travis' insistence that Kyle tell the truth about his sexuality and his attempt to propose to Cate are manifestations of his (Travis') desire to define the present as if it were the past. The former succeeds, while the latter doesn't. What point do you think the author is making by giving these two attempts at achieving something similar very different results? What themes are at play in the contrast?

Vocabulary

deteriorate, aneurysm, drastic, pulsate, fervor, sincerity, repulse, bludgeon, maraca



Part 10, Chapter 35, Epilogue

Summary

Jeremy Pratt, Part 1 – Joined by Audrey (who, Travis suggests in narration, is there because of Hatton), Kyle, Cate, Hatton, and Travis travel to the cemetery in another city where Jeremy Pratt's body is buried. When they arrive, they split up to search for the grave, Travis ending up with Cate. As they search, Cate reveals that Turner's nose was broken by Travis' punch, and comments again on how necessary it was for her and everyone else to move on after Travis' "death". Eventually, the friends gather around Jeremy's grave, each saying a few words as they scatter Travis' ashes on it. Travis scatters the last handful, commenting in narration that as the ashes hit the ground they essentially disappeared. The moment is interrupted by the arrival of Jeremy's mom and younger sister Julia. Mrs. Pratt is, at first, angry at seeing strangers around her son's grave, but then realizes who Travis is. As Cate talks with Julia, Mrs. Pratt asks to see the scar on Travis' neck, touching it lightly when he reveals it. She then reveals that Jeremy always took care of Julia by holding her hand, and asks whether Travis would do the same. At first both he and Julia are reluctant, but then he takes her hand and marvels both at how right it feels and yet how strange it seems that he gets to go on while Jeremy does not.

Jeremy Pratt, Part 2 - As Kyle is dropping her off at home, Cate says she wants to drive Travis back to his mom's place. As the others drive away, Travis waits for Cate to find her keys. When she does, he asks if he can see the painting she did of him. She shows it to him and offers to give it back, but he says she can keep it: it will remind her of them. When she's driving her home, and as they're stopped at a light. Travis can't resist his impulse and kisses Cate on the cheek. She pulls the car over and erupts in temper, telling him he can't do that kind of thing anymore. He erupts in turn, saying that she can't expect him to behave like an adult when in every way that matters, he's still sixteen and she got five years of growing up that he never had. Cate then drives away, Travis commenting in narration that he's glad she didn't look back. "As long as she kept looking back," he says in narration, "I'd keep being there ... I'd stay in one spot till she came back to me." And then he comments on how even though he said to Cate it was okay it really wasn't, adding that pretending things are okay is what people say to people they love even when (especially when?) things aren't okay. He also realizes that he's never going to be who he was, and that he's always going to be who he is.

Epilogue – In present tense narration, Travis describes his return to Arnie's Arcade the day after his birthday with a single token that he found in a pair of jeans in his "old" bedroom at his dad's. He steps into the retro room, comes face-to-face with the Space Invaders machine and all the memories it evokes ... and presses start.



Analysis

The title of this section might just as easily be “Meeting Jeremy Pratt”, since this is in many ways the most meaningful encounter with “him” that Travis actually has. There is joy in his earlier encounter with Jeremy’s skateboarding ability, and almost debilitating frustration with his encounter with Jeremy’s lack of skill at the arcade. But the moment here, when Travis actually encounters evidence of Jeremy’s heart, soul, and overall identity is the moment when the two lives (as opposed to just the two bodies) start to become one. It is the next-to-last step in his journey of transformation, the point at which important truths about the relationship between past and present and the ways of facing / living a changed life reach their highest, most intense point of consideration. It is not, however, the novel’s climax. THAT is the encounter between Cate and Travis in the car.

Travis’ encounter in the coffee shop with Turner, as previously discussed, is the most emotionally and physically intense manifestation of both the thematic and narrative aspects of Travis’ struggle to integrate the past with the present. But because the encounter in the car is Travis’ last attempt to bring his past relationship with Cate into the present; because it results in his out-bursting plea for her understanding, and because he realizes that he’s been pretending as much as the people whose pretendings have upset him so much throughout the narrative, the encounter in the car can be seen / defined as the ultimate moment in which the truth becomes apparent to him, and that he has no choice but to change.

Evidence of that change manifests in the epilogue, not so much in the events portrayed (which suggest that he has one last piece of past/present tension to resolve before being able to fully move on) as in the way those events are described. As noted in “Style – Language and Meaning” the shift from past tense to present tense narration clearly suggests that like the words he is using to describe what’s happening, Travis is himself now living in the present, or at least moving more thoroughly and engagedly in that direction than he has at any other point in the narrative. He has come to the end of one journey, and the beginning of another: his past is now joined to the present in the way his head is now joined to another body, and in the same way as head and body become something new, so too do past and present join to become a truly new life.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Mrs. Pratt wants to see the scar? Why does she touch it? What do you think she’s trying to accomplish / realize / feel / understand?

Discussion Question 2

What does the releasing / disappearing of Travis’ ashes metaphorically suggest about Travis’ state of mind / being at this point in the novel? What might this action suggest in terms of one, or more, of the book’s themes?



Discussion Question 3

What does the epilogue metaphorically suggest about where Travis is at in the process of accepting / moving into his new life? What aspects of setting / action come into symbolic play here?

Vocabulary

convulse, sinister, waiver, enthuse, pessimistic, deceptive



Characters

Travis Coates

Travis is the novel's central character, its protagonist and narrator. Five years before the story begins and fatally ill with cancer, he agreed to participate in an experimental surgery to remove his head and, at some point in the future when technology allowed, have it attached to another body. In the novel's first chapter, begins, he is waking up from the second surgery, which involved the attachment of his head to the body of the recently deceased Jeremy Pratt. The novel tells the story of the various adjustments Travis has to make in a life that is simultaneously old (in the sense that his inner identity is still his: all his memories are fully intact) and brand new (in the sense that in the five years since his "death", everyone in his life, and indeed the world, has moved on, to varying degrees and in varying ways).

Overall, there is the sense that Travis' physical adjustment to his new reality is of less narrative and / or thematic concern. While there are aspects of his body that are quite different (i.e. he's taller, fitter, and coordinated / skilled in ways that Jeremy's body is accustomed to, but Travis' mind is not), the story and its themes are primarily defined by Travis' internal, rather than external, struggles – his increasingly desperate attempts to sort out who he is emotionally, psychologically, and at times even spiritually. His struggles boil down to one essential experience: Travis is desperate for everything in his life – his family, his romantic relationships, his friendships – to be as they were when he "died". To him, he just went to sleep and has just woken up: to the rest of the world, life has changed significantly, and in many cases unalterably. His journey of transformation over the course of the narrative, which has both narrative and thematic implications, is a movement from awakening to a new life, through clinging to the old life, to discovering and accepting that he has to let that life go in order to fully embrace not only who he is now, but who the people around him are.

Ray and Sharon Coates

Ray and Sharon Coates are Travis' parents. They are portrayed throughout the narrative as being loving and supportive as he struggles to come to terms with his new life, but facing challenges of their own as they strive to find the balance between loving (and grieving) the person he was and loving (and respecting) the person he's becoming. Eventually, the narrative reveals that the Coates' inability to deal with both their grief after Travis' death and the possibility of his return to life led to their divorce and, when Travis comes back, to the eventual charade that their marriage is still intact. This means that the Coates' and their situation / decisions are key manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in the need for / dangers of pretending.



Dr. Lloyd Saranson

Dr. Saranson is the physician and researcher who designed and performed the experimental surgery that attaches Travis' head to Jeremy's body. Extremely intelligent and, at the same time, extremely compassionate, Dr. Saranson is portrayed as treating his patients as human beings, not just as the subject of medical procedures.

Lawrence Ramsey

Lawrence Ramsey is the only other person, besides Travis, who underwent the head transplant surgery and survived. He becomes a friend and confidante to Travis, their common experiences providing the basis for a friendship that becomes one of the most important new relationships for both of them.

Kyle Hagler

Kyle was Travis' best friend before he "died", their relationship being one of the two peer relationships that Travis is most desperate to resume following his return to life. In the last days of their first friendship, Kyle confessed to Travis that he (Kyle) was gay, but in the early days of their renewed friendship, he indicates that he is now dating girls. Travis' confusion, his subsequent attempts to get Kyle to face the truth, and Kyle's response to those attempts, function on three important levels: as key manifestations of Travis' attempt to preserve the past at all costs; as similarly key manifestations of the novel's thematic exploration of the dangers / necessities of pretending; and also as important elements in the book's thematic consideration of the nature and importance of friendship.

Cate Conroy

Cate was Travis' girlfriend before he died, their relationship being portrayed in Travis' narration as being extremely close – open, honest, trusting, playful, and vulnerable, but not sexual. As is the case with his relationship with Kyle, when Travis "returns to life" he is desperate to pick up his relationship with Cate where it left off, but runs into a serious obstacle when he learns that Cate, now in her early twenties, has become engaged. This does not, however, prevent him from trying to win her back and/or resume their relationship, even though Cate insists that even though she does still care for him, her situation has changed and things cannot, and will not, go back to what they were. Cate responds to Travis' attempts with a clear set of boundaries around what's appropriate for their new situation, at times with anger and confusion, but eventually and overall with compassion, respect, and affection.



Glen and Janice Conroy

Glen and Janice are Cate's parents. When he comes back, Travis sees them before he sees Cate, and is glad to be welcomed / cared for by them. The Conroys tell him that Cate is happy in her new life, but offer their support for him as he tries to reconnect with her.

Turner

Turner is Cate's fiancé. He is portrayed as being open-minded and compassionate about Travis and his situation, particularly when it comes to his (Travis') lingering feelings for Cate. Turner's patience is tested when Travis proposes marriage to Cate: he and Travis get into a physical altercation, but Turner is compassionate enough that while he emerges from that altercation more physically wounded than Travis, he is able to understand and forgive him.

Hatton Sharpe

When Travis returns to school, he makes friends with Hatton. Eccentric, outspoken, and at times outrageous, Hatton speaks the truth to Travis even when he doesn't want to hear it, becoming a very good friend and confidante. He has a powerful crush on Audrey Hagler, eventually getting a chance to act on it when they both accompany Travis on his visit to the grave of Jeremy Pratt.

Audrey Hagler

Audrey is Kyle's younger sister. When Travis was first alive, he saw her as a little girl. In his second life, they are in the same grade at school: their relationship is more that of peers. A relatively minor character in the book, she is portrayed as compassionate and sensitive, but opinionated and strong-willed.

Matt Braynard

Matt is Audrey's boyfriend, and one of the leaders of the school's Christian youth group. He is originally portrayed as being, or at least perceived as, conservative and judgmental: at one point, Audrey responds angrily to his contention that what happened to Travis is a kind of evil. Eventually, however, his perspective shifts, and he expresses his concern for Travis' well-being by supporting him in his difficulty with handling the mail he receives.



Philip Franklin

Franklin is the new, relatively inexperienced guidance counsellor at Travis' school. In their first meeting, Franklin is awkward and unsure about how to deal with Travis' situation, but is earnest and honest in his desire to do what he can to support Travis through his transition. Later, he teams up with Matt Braynard to slowly open the door to Travis considering, and responding to, the mail he receives.

Jeremy Pratt

Jeremy Pratt is the teenager whose body Travis' head gets attached to in an experimental, highly risky surgery. While Jeremy died from a brain tumor, his body was unaffected, leaving it available for a potential fit with someone whose head was healthy, but whose body was unable to sustain life. There isn't a great deal of information in the narrative about the sort of person Jeremy was, but what is included suggests he was fit and athletic, not terribly coordinated, and tender towards / careful of his younger sister, Julia. That said, it's possible to infer aspects of his character from the fact that he agreed, like Travis, to participate in this surgery: a sense of compassion (for someone whose life he could save by donating his body), a sense of being a risk-taker (given that there's little or no proof the surgery will ever be a success), and a sense of courage (given that in going into both death and his body's after-life, there is much to be afraid of). In the latter two senses, he and Travis have more in common than Travis initially seems to believe.

Mrs. Pratt

At the end of the book, Travis and his friends visit the grave of Jeremy Pratt, where they scatter the ashes of Travis' body. They are interrupted by the arrival of Jeremy's mother, Mrs. Pratt, and his little sister Julia. Mrs. Pratt is initially upset at what she seems to suspect is inappropriate behavior around Jeremy's grave, but she realizes who Travis is, she expresses her wonder at what happened and asks Travis to hold Julia's hand the way Jeremy used to. There is the sense that although she continues to grieve the loss of her son, in this moment / situation Mrs. Pratt is, like the other characters, able to move on from her grief.



Symbols and Symbolism

Travis' Scar

Throughout the narrative, the scar on Travis' neck (the point at which his head was surgically attached to Jeremy Pratt's body) becomes a physical representation of both what happened to him in the past (what amounts to death and coming back to life) and what he's facing in the present (what amounts to coming back into a new identity and life).

Jeremy Pratt's Body

From the neck down – from the scar down – Travis has the body of Jeremy Pratt, a muscly, athletic teenager. It's a body that takes Travis some getting used to, but which he's happy to have: even though the body, and particularly its hands, are not as coordinated as he's used to, other parts of his anatomy (such as the sexual organs, as Travis makes a point of noting) are more developed than his old ones.

Scarves

Early in the narrative, Travis' mom takes him shopping for some new clothes, and suggests that he buy some scarves to cover up the scar on his neck. For a while he resists the idea, and then for a while uses them to deflect what he experiences as a lot of unwelcome attention. Eventually, he discards them as concealing an identity that he has to learn to accept and live with.

Cate's Painting

In Travis' first life, aspiring artist Cate created a painting in response to Travis saying he loved her. That painting hung in his bedroom until he "died", and was one of his most cherished possessions. After his "death", Cate kept the painting in her home. At the end of the narrative, as Travis' and Cate's relationship is redefined, he says she can keep it to remember him by.

"The Great Wave off Kanagawa"

This Japanese painting by the artist Hokusai is one of the most renowned Japanese works of art in the world. It portrays a giant wave looming over a group of fragile-looking fishing boats, Mount Fuji in the background. Like Cate's painting, a print of "The Great Wave" hung in Travis' bedroom, and was another of his cherished possessions. Unlike Cate's painting, however, the print stayed with the rest of Travis' things, and was moved into the duplicate of his bedroom in his father's new home.



Travis' Letters

Travis receives several boxes worth of mail from people responding to his surgery. Some of the letters refer to him as a hero and an inspiration; others refer to him as evil and denying the will of God and the natural order. Initially Travis is reluctant to read any of the mail, but as he becomes more accepting of his situation, and with the guidance of fellow surgery survivor Lawrence Ramsey, he also becomes slightly more open to the idea.

Space Invaders

This is an arcade game from the 1980's/90's, a "retro" game in which the player destroys increasingly fast, increasingly numerous ranks of alien "spaceships". Before his "death", Travis had an impossibly high score in the game, a score that at one point in the narrative he obsessively tries to duplicate. At the end of the novel, in its epilogue, he settles in to make one last attempt to beat his old record.

Travis' Theatre Seats

Before his "death", Travis rescued two of the old seats from the Triton theatre where he and Cate had several dates to see old movies, where he told Cate he loved her, and which Cate immortalized in her painting. After Travis' "death", the seats were sold, but Hatton manages to track them down and return them to Travis.

Travis' Ashes

After his "death" and the removal of his head, the rest of Travis' body was cremated and his ashes were kept by his parents. When Travis discovers the jar of ashes in the back of his parents' closet he feels extremely uncomfortable, until Hatton and Kyle come up with a way to dispose of them that fits with Travis' need and desire to move on into a new life.

Travis' Bedrooms

When he first "comes back to life", Travis moves back in with his parents, into the room that was once his but which has, since his "death", been redecorated. He never feels quite right being there, partly because so many of his possessions have disappeared. Later, he discovers that those possessions have been moved to a second bedroom in what he discovers is his father's new apartment as a result of his dad's inability to move on after his (Travis) "death".



Settings

Kansas City, Missouri

This is the community in which most of the narrative's action takes place. It is the home for Travis and his family, as well as the home of his friends and their families.

The Triton Theatre

The Triton is the movie theatre where, before Travis' "death", he and Cate had several dates to watch movies; where Travis declared his love for Cate; and which Cate used as the setting for a painting she created in which she expressed her own feelings in response. Later in the narrative, the theatre is the setting for the first time that Travis sees Cate after he "comes back to life", his already strong feelings for her intensified by seeing her in a place that's so important to them both.

Arnie's Arcade

Before he "died", Travis regularly went to this gaming center to play Space Invaders. In the middle of the novel, the Arcade is the setting for Travis' obsessive attempt to recapture his skills at the game, while at the end of the novel, he revisits the arcade for one last attempt.

The Saranson Center

The Saranson Center, in Denver, Colorado, is where Travis has the surgery that attaches his head to another body. Early in the narrative, he pays a couple of follow-up visits to the center, where his progress and/or recovery are assessed.

Pleasant Grove Cemetery

In the novel's final full chapter, Travis and his friends visit Jeremy Pratt's grave, in Pleasant Grove Cemetery in Quincy Illinois. While there, Travis lays his own ashes to rest and meets Jeremy's mother, a circumstance that enables them both, to some degree, to put their pasts to rest.



Themes and Motifs

Living a Changed Life

This is the narrative's primary theme, in that much (if not all) of the novel's action, or plot, focuses on the actions and choices of protagonist Travis Coates as he struggles to do just what this theme suggests – live a changed life, a life that looks and seems familiar in many ways, a life that he wants to be the same, but a life that in many more ways is actually fundamentally different from the life he knew, and left. There is the sense that Travis' struggles are grounded in either a fundamental denial of how things have changed in his world or a powerful fear that once he sees the here and now for what it truly is, he (or who he's become) will have no place in it. It could be argued that there are elements of both in his character and story. Ultimately, Travis feels as though he hasn't changed, and therefore believes the world and his life within it should not have changed either: but both have, and therein lies his personal conflict and the context for his journey of transformation from the novel's beginning to its end.

This theme also manifests in the lives of several of the other characters, who have several different reactions and experiences. Some deal with change relatively well: Cate has made clear choices and decisions about how to both integrate, and move on from, the change that has come into her life as the result of Travis' death. Her parents are similarly clear on how they have both been affected by, and moved on from, Travis' death. They may have struggled with change, but they have worked through it healthily and ultimately embraced it.

On the other side of the coin are Travis' parents, who, as the narrative clearly indicates, struggle to integrate not just Travis' return to life, but as the narrative reveals, had significant trouble dealing with the change associated with his death, those difficulties eventually manifesting in their divorce, and in Travis' dad's retention of Travis' things in his room. Their choice to put up the pretense that their marriage is as it was clearly suggests that they are trying to keep the change in Travis' life to a minimum, a choice that is well intentioned, but ultimately more damaging than supportive. Their difficulty with change echoes / parallels the same difficulty in their son.

Walking a middle path is Kyle, who feels intense relief when he realizes that his life has to change, that it is in fact changing, and that that change, while occasionally painful, is actually good. This last is particularly important, in that unlike the other non-Travis characters listed above, Kyle's experience with living a changed life shows the way for what the novel seems to suggest Travis' journey needs to be – accepting what is, no longer pretending (deluding himself), and moving ahead into the future if not with confidence at least a certain sense of security that the new, changed reality is the right one ... in fact, the only one worth accepting and/or living in. It is, in fact, Kyle more than all the other characters who lights the way for Travis to find his own, similar path.



The Tension between Past and Present

For all the characters struggling to live a changed life, the main reason the struggles exist is, in general, they have difficulty finding an effective balance between acknowledging the past as the past and the present as something affected by, but separate from, the past. Here again, the primary example is Travis. His actions throughout the narrative are defined by a past that has shaped the present, but which was lived in a fundamentally different set of circumstances: he and Cate were a couple, Kyle was facing uncomfortable truths about himself, and his (Travis') parents had a relatively happy, secure marriage. All three of those cherished circumstances are different for Travis when he "comes back to life", and because he physically and emotionally feels / believes that he never left that life in the first place, he has difficulty understanding / accepting that that past is no longer his present reality. There is the sense that because he is so afraid of finding out what his present life IS like, he denies the reality of the past, a situation that creates a great deal of tension and conflict not only within him, but between him and the other characters who are themselves struggling with past/present tensions.

Cate, for example, has contentedly (but not necessarily easily) moved away from her past and into both a present and a future that gives her what she needs and makes her both happy and fulfilled. Travis' insistence that their shared past continue to be their present, even though Cate has moved on, creates a lot of conflict in a life where, arguably, the past and present are in their proper relationship. Cate is very clear that the past is the past, the present is the present, and the future is, something that results from an interaction of the two and is up to her, in relationship / dialogue with others, to define. In a similar, but less emphasized, way, her parents have worked through past / present tensions that they have felt somewhat less profoundly than Cate, but have still had to sort through. For them, it's clear what the past was; what the present with is. For all three characters, tensions between past and present are worked through, rather than dwelled upon.

For Travis' parents, like their son, pretend the past is still the present while trying to make Travis' present more real, more safe, and more appealing. Their personal interactions with that past, and with the tension between past and present, are both vivid and, when the truth of how they react to those tensions is revealed, ultimately quite poignant. It could be argued that on some level, they are based in the desires of any / every parent: to keep the child they knew and loved theirs, to keep their relationship as familiar as it was, and ease the suffering and pain of the person they have both responsibility and deep affection for. But Travis' parents, like every parent and even more necessarily in this case, have to let go of what was and face the reality of what is, as hard as that might be.

Meanwhile, and is the case with the theme of "living a changed life" as discussed above, Kyle successfully embodies and demonstrates a journey that the other characters either have completed (i.e. Cate) or have to complete over the course of the narrative (i.e. Travis, his parents). Kyle tries to pretend that a painful part of his past



never even existed, and tries to turn the present into a manifestation of that delusion. What's particularly notable about Kyle's experience, in relation to this theme, is evocative of the intense relief that can come into play when tension between past and present is finally resolved. It's an aspect of the process that Cate's journey, as portrayed here, doesn't include, and that Travis and his parents don't get to, but possibly will in the after-pages of the book and its characters.

Pretending

Throughout the narrative, several characters put a great deal of time and energy into pretending they're something they're not, or pretending that something is true when it is not. Kyle, for example, tries very hard to keep up the pretense of being straight while; at the same time, Travis' parents work even harder to keep up the pretense of being married. In both these circumstances, the truth is being concealed because of fear: in Kyle's case, fear of being laughed at and ridiculed ... in the case of Travis' parents, fear that the knowledge of the truth will cause him a great deal of pain and set back his recovery. Also in both circumstances, the revelations of pretense turn out to be more painful than what is being revealed: the lies, the pretending, hurt more than the truth. Lying, or pretending, is seen as a kind of betrayal.

Meanwhile, Travis' insistence that he and Cate will inevitably find themselves back in their relationship can be seen as a kind of pretending – in Travis' case, a pretending that is actually a kind of denial, a refusal to look at the truth of his situation. In the cases of Kyle and Travis' parents, they know the truth and are presenting an alternative: in Travis' case, he refuses to even consider the truth, living entirely in the alternative. He is pretending in order to preserve what he wants to be the truth: the other characters are pretending in order to prevent the truth from being revealed.

Clear and effective contrasts to all this pretending show up in the actions and attitudes of two other major characters. Cate and Hatton are both honest with and about themselves: they are doubtful of, and unhappy with, pretending (in the same way that Travis says he is but, in fact, is as much of a pretender as the others), and at times get hurt by the pretending of other characters. They have, in fact, a kind of courage and/or integrity that the pretending characters lack – the courage to face the truth, and the integrity to live it.

The Dangers of Obsession

Obsession manifests in varying degrees and in varying ways in the lives and experiences of several characters in the narrative. The primary examples are a pair of situations in which Travis finds / places himself, one longer term that plays out over the course of the narrative (his obsession with his relationship with Cate), and one shorter term (his obsession with getting the high score in the video game, that plays out only in Part 6). Here it's important to note the relationship between these two incidents – specifically, the fact that the latter can be seen as an overt, outward, external release of



the buildup of feeling associated with the former. In other words, Travis' self-traumatizing obsession with the video game both parallels and channels his self-inhibiting, self-deluding obsession with Cate. In both cases, his well-being is threatened – his physical well-being in the case of the latter, his psychological well-being (as well as his capacity to see and/or accept the truth) in the case of the former.

Meanwhile, obsessions show up in the narrative in other ways. Kyle's obsession with concealing his true sexual orientation; Travis' parents' obsession with concealing the truth about their marriage; and even Hatton's more comic, relatively minor obsession with Audrey Hagler all mirror Travis' obsession with Cate and with the rejuvenation of their past relationship. The point to note here is that all three of these secondary obsessions end up resolved and/or released by the end of the narrative: Kyle accepts his truth, Travis' parents reveal their truth, and Hatton gets a chance to spend time with Audrey, thus making his obsession seemingly obsolete. All these resolutions / releases can be seen as foreshadowing the eventual resolution / release of Travis' obsession with Cate, and what the epilogue suggests as the last gasp of his obsession with Space Invaders.

The Value of Friendship

For Travis, the primary positive in both versions of his life (old head / old body, old head / new body) is his friendships. In the past, Cate was his best friend turned beloved, while Kyle was his best friend with whom he could talk about almost anything, including Cate and Kyle's own questions and fears about his sexuality. There was a profound and important sense of trust and vulnerability in both relationships that is, in many ways, at the heart of Travis' need for both relationships to be the same in his new life (i.e. in the present) as they were in the past. The fact that both relationships are significantly changed after his return, at least at first, adds fear and grief to that need, which is arguably the main reason that Travis feels as (strongly? aggressively? obsessively?) as he does about both relationships returning to what they were. For him, his friendships are who he was, and are who he wants to be.

The importance of friendship to Travis is further illustrated in the development / portrayal of his relationship with Hatton. The speed with which they become so close and so honest with each other suggests clearly that for both of them, that kind of connection is extremely valuable – Travis because he needs something similar to his previous experience of friendship-based security, Hatton because there is the sense that such friendships are something new and valuable to him, and that he's prepared to do just about anything in order to preserve this discovery. Here it's interesting to note that of all the characters, Hatton has arguably the best gift for friendship – he is a good listener, a perceptive observer, a truth speaker, and a humor-finder. He brings levity, insight, and objectivity to his friendship with Travis, qualities that he directly benefits / grows from and that Cate and Kyle benefit / grow from IN-directly.

Styles

Point of View

For the most part, and with one notable exception, the story is told from the first person / past tense point of view: specifically, from the perspective of narrator and protagonist Travis Coates. This authorial choice takes the reader specifically and purposefully into the experience of the character: the phrase “inside his head” comes to mind, partly because it is an accurate way of describing how first person narration works (i.e. getting into the head / mind, as well as the heart and soul, of a character) but also because it is a groaner of a pun that is exactly the kind of joke that Travis would make (see “Language and Meaning” below). Specifically, the only physical part of Travis that is actually the body he was born with and lived with for 16 years IS his head, that having been transplanted onto the body of someone else. The story is, in many ways, about Travis being literally and metaphorically in his head as he struggles to make both his new body and his new life his own.

The notable exception to the book’s overall past tense point of view comes in the epilogue. At this point in the book, after all of Travis’s failed struggles to make his present life as much like his past life as possible, the narration shifts to present tense. The primary value of this shift in point of view is to emphasize / reinforce the sense that Travis is now making a conscious choice to live in the present. Up to this point in the novel, the narrative perspective suggested that everything HAD happened: that it was all in the past, which is how Travis viewed his life. With the present tense epilogue, the narrative perspective suggests that everything IS happening, in the moment: that the present, rather than the past, is now taking focus in Travis’ life as well as in the story of his life. In this clear, deliberate, and thematically / emotionally resonant shift, there is a clear instance of style and substance interacting.

Language and Meaning

There are several important points to note about the book’s use of language, and how that language communicates meaning. The first is noted above, in relation to Point of View: the clear shift in language usage in the epilogue is a similarly clear reinforcement of the protagonist’s shift in identity and / or self-awareness. Also as noted above, Travis has a quirky, sometimes black sense of humor about his situation that often takes the other characters, and possibly the reader, by surprise. This sense of humor is echoed in a similarly somewhat dark sense of humor in Hatton, a common characteristic that perhaps explains why they become friends as quickly and as deeply as they do. A third point to note relates to the fact that there is almost no reference at all to the scientific aspects of Travis’ situation: there is virtually no discussion of either the theory or the practicality of attaching someone’s head to another someone’s body (i.e. no references to how the spinal cord is connected to the brain, how blood vessels are connected, and



so on). There is the sense that the author has deliberately chosen to avoid this aspect of the work and explore the more uniquely human aspect of the experience.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the book's use of language relates to the book's structure (see below). This is the fact that with the exception of the first chapter and the epilogue, each chapter begins with a repetition of the phrase, image, or idea that ended the previous chapter. Sometimes the repetitions are exact; sometimes there are slight variations; and in at least one case (Section 9, Chapters 33/34), the repetition becomes a dissected pun on the word that ended the previous chapter. It may not seem immediately clear, or apparent, why the author made this particular choice, other than to create / develop a sense of continuity or flow between the various chapters. Upon further consideration, however, there is a sense that again, style is reflecting / manifesting substance: in the same way as Travis, throughout the novel, is discovering that circumstances and people around him are not always what they seem, the reworking of the various chapter-to-chapter repetitions may suggest that words and ideas are likewise not always what they seem: that the meanings of phrases and images have different and/or unexpected implications than might otherwise be apparent.

Structure

For the most part, the narrative moves in a fairly straightforward fashion. It portrays, reveals, and considers events in the chronological order (that is, the order in time) in which they take place. The basic narrative / structural principle at work here is that of cause-and-effect, or action-reaction: Event A takes place, which results in Event B taking place, and so on and so on. As is the case with most narratives that follow this basic structural plan, events and story are defined by the drives and needs of the central character and protagonist – in this case, Travis Coates, whose determination to live the present according to what he knows of his past propels the narrative forward and defines / triggers the events that shape the story.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this primary structural line, or focus. These are moments at which the narrative jumps backwards into important events in the past, a technique or element commonly known as a "flashback". Examples include the references to the origins of the painting Cate created for Travis (Chapter 8), the story of how his friends and family said their goodbyes just before he "died" (Chapter 9), and the story how the dying Travis experienced all the holidays of a year in one day (Chapter 26). Aside from providing information and/or actual glimpses of events to which Travis refers (showing, not just telling), these flashbacks also function to demonstrate how Travis' views and experiences of the past define his views of the present. Further: because the relationship between past and present is also an important thematic element of the novel, the flashbacks also have thematic significance.

Quotes

I want to tell you a story about how you can suddenly wake up to find yourself living a life you were never supposed to live. It could happen to you, just like it happened to me, and you could try to get back the life you think you deserve to be living. Just like I did.
-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 2)

Importance: This quote introduces, in broad strokes terms, the central narrative situation / premise of the story and also its primary theme - specifically, an examination of the struggles associated with living a new life.

The weirdest part, truly, was realizing I'd been doing all this undressing and examining and making sure the door was locked with hands that were different from my hands, with hands that had never touched Cate or knuckle-bumped with Kyle or opened my locker at school. These were Jeremy Pratt's clever hands, and they'd fooled me into thinking they were mine.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 24)

Importance: This quote marks the first occasion that Travis really studies the new body that he's found himself attached to, and the first time he realizes that this new body makes both him and his life fundamentally different from what they were.

Some people say dying alone is a fate worse than death itself. Well, they should try being alone during the living part sometimes. There's no quicker way to make you wonder why the hell you ever thought you'd want to return.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 35)

Importance: This quote refers to the basic loneliness Travis feels as a result of realizing that a great deal of what he knew and valued of his life is no longer what it was.

Before Cate I was just Travis. I was a quiet kid who would blush easily when he got too much attention and always walked with his head down ... before she was there to be my audience, to pay me attention when everyone else had given up on it, I was quite sure I'd always sort of fade into the background.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 72)

Importance: This quote reveals the depths of identity that Travis believes have been affected / defined by his relationship with Cate.

... I had all these people who had to watch me leave and pretend to hope that I could come back. It was all pretend – I was pretending and they were pretending because that's what got us through it. We fake it sometimes, don't we? We go along with impossible things because we have to survive when life starts getting too dark ...

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 81)



Importance: This quote directly explores the novel's thematic interest in the dangers, and occasional necessities, of pretending.

...it felt so right. It was so comfortable to be just moving and breathing and able to sit up and bend and jump and stand on one leg. Jeremy Pratt's body was now doing all these things that my old body had stopped doing for me, things that everyone takes for granted until they aren't there anymore. Hell, I was even impressed with my new ability to fart with such ease and so very little pain. You know things are weird when you start appreciating your farts.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 84)

Importance: In addition to portraying how comfortable Travis is becoming with his new body, this quote also clearly portrays him as a) being a 16-year-old boy, the sort of person to who conversations about farts are appealing, and b) having an offbeat sense of humor, one of the most engaging things about his narrative voice.

That was supposed to be me down there laughing with her. She was supposed to be whispering things into MY ear and leaning her head on MY shoulder. This guy stole my life and he didn't even know it.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 112)

Importance: This quote brings home the depth of dismay and upset Travis feels as the result of seeing Cate out with her fiance. It heightens and intensifies his need to get her back.

It was like if I closed my eyes and didn't look at any of them, didn't see how they'd aged and changed, then I could pretend away the dying and the surgery and the waking up to a new world. If every moment could just have this effortless familiarity, then I could be okay.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 15 paragraph Page 119)

Importance: Here Travis' narration summarizes and encapsulates his feelings about the relationship between his old life and his new life, and as such manifests some of the narrative's key themes.

... no matter how often you see or talk to someone, no matter how much you know them or don't know them, you always fill up some space in their lives that can't ever be replaced the right way again once you leave it.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 15 paragraph Page 124)

Importance: Here Travis sums up, at least to some degree, what it must be like to come back from the dead and try to fill the gap that the person leaving left behind.

To her, I was only part me, and as much as that hurt, as unnatural as it felt not to touch her, I knew I couldn't go wrapping some other guy's arms around her and thinking that would make things better. I was Travis, sure, but I was Jeremy Pratt, too. It was an easy thing for me to forget, but I wasn't so sure it would be that easy for her.



-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 152)

Importance: This is one of the few occasions in the narrative when Travis, generally obsessed with winning Cate back on his terms and in his way, empathizes with the difficulty of her situation.

Maybe time, as they say, is just a human invention. Maybe I never really left because leaving wasn't possible. Maybe we're all on a string, and maybe our past selves are on that string and our future selves are too and maybe Jeremy Pratt's there. Maybe he's there lying awake at night and wondering if his family will be okay after he dies. Maybe we all just exist, all versions of us exist at all times, and we have to figure out a way ... to find each one and tell that version that it's okay, that it's all just the way it works...

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 22 paragraph Page 195)

Importance: In one of his rare flights of fantasy, Travis imagines what life would be like if people could experience time in a different way.

... in that moment I understood what they say about nostalgia, that no matter if you're thinking of something good or bad, it always leaves you a little emptier afterward. I didn't like it. It reminded me of everything I was trying to ignore.

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 23 paragraph Page 213)

Importance: This is an interesting insight into the experience of nostalgia, which is commonly regarded as a present experience but which, as Travis suggests, can have a very dark side.

Even though I was almost gone, they were still there to remind me that I wasn't quite dead yet. And to be honest, I wouldn't have minded just closing my eyes right then and letting go. Wouldn't that be perfect? Just dying right there with your two best friends helping you remember everything you loved about being alive?

-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 26 paragraph Page 243)

Importance: This quote, emerging in narration following the description of the day at the hospital in which Travis, his family, and his friends celebrated all the holidays of the year in a few hours, describes Travis' feelings of pure, transcendent joy, and sums up what seems to be his view of the ideal death.

You know how they all must've felt. They had to try to move on because waiting for you might not have worked. We did the easy part, Travis. We took a little nap. They all had to live for five years without us. They had to talk about us and think about us and see the things that reminded them of us. Put yourself in their shoes for a minute, huh? See if you don't stop breathing.

-- Lawrence Ramsay (Chapter 31 paragraph Page 291)

Importance: This is one of the few occasions in which one of the other characters speaks bluntly and directly to Travis about how seemingly selfish and insensitive he's being.



You and Cate were great ... and I wish more than anything that we could all go back to the way it was, that we were all sixteen again and you didn't have to go away. But you know what else? I bet we could walk into that store right over there and ask any stranger we ran into if they wanted the same exact thing, and they'd say yes. Everyone wants to change the past, Travis. But they can't. None of us can.
-- Kyle (Chapter 32 paragraph Page 299)

Importance: Again, this quote marks an occasion when a character - this time, one of Travis' best friends - speaks bluntly to him about the narrowness of his perspective on his situation.

We all get people that help us make sense of the world, right? We just have to figure out how to keep them however we can. You and me, we worked. But you had to leave and I had to let other people in or I'd die too. I knew you didn't want that.
-- Cate (Chapter 35 paragraph Page 327)

Importance: Here, Cate makes one more attempt to get Travis to understand why she made the choices she did in the aftermath of his "death".

When I died, I didn't see anything. No bright lights or heavenly bodies or long dark tunnels. But when I leaned in to kiss Cate Conroy in her freezing car while we were stopped at that red light, I saw every single moment of everything. I felt every single thing I've ever felt and heard every sound I've ever heard. And even when she turned her face so my lips touched her cold cheek in the dark, I knew I'd do it all again. I don't know why, but I would.
-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 35 paragraph Page 335)

Importance: This quote, taken from the novel's climax, functions on two levels: to give us useful information on Travis' experience of "death", and to define vividly the depth and intensity of his feelings for Cate.

... that's what we have to do, right? We have to tell people it's okay even when we know it isn't. That's what we say to people we love when we realize that maybe we can't have them the way we want them. I guess it was kind of like that with everyone. For me, anyway. No one would ever be exactly who they'd been, and I'd never be exactly who I'd been either. I'd always be ... that kid from the news. Noggin. Travis Coates, who died but isn't dead anymore.
-- Narration (Travis) (Chapter 35 paragraph Page 337)

Importance: In this quote, Travis indicates that he has finally at least begun to come to terms with the reality of his situation, and what he has to do: the past is gone, now is now, and he has to let go of the former and truly come to life in the latter.