

# Ordinary People Study Guide

## Ordinary People by Judith Guest

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Ordinary People Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-2, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3-4, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5-6, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7-8, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9-10, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11-12, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13-14, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 15-16, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 17-18, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-20, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 21-22, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 23-24, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 25-26, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 27-28, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 29-30, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 31-Epilogue, Ordinary People.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>

Topics for Discussion.....30

# Plot Summary

Written by Judith Guest, *Ordinary People* was first published in 1976 by the Viking Press, Inc.

*Ordinary People* is the story of a family in Illinois that has for years given people the impression that they are the perfect American family. However, there are dangerous flaws that even the three main characters aren't aware of until the youngest son tries to commit suicide. Driven by his guilt over the death of his brother in a boating accident just a year prior, Conrad Jarrett, age sixteen at the time, cuts his wrists. His father finds him in time, and his parents have him committed to a hospital to try to work through his issues.

The story begins shortly after Conrad returns from the hospital, and he is having a difficult time adjusting. At school, he's a year behind his friends. He had been a top member of the swim team before the suicide attempt, but now he has no motivation, and despite encouragement from his parents and an offer of extra help from the coach, he eventually quits the team.

At home, Conrad's father Calvin is overly solicitous with him. His mother, Beth, seems to have little to do with him other than to offer directives and admonishments. While there are many moments early in the book when Cal and Beth share intimate moments, there are no outward expressions of love or signs of affection for Conrad from either of them.

Conrad begins to rebuild his life after he meets Dr. Berger, a psychiatrist recommended by his doctor at the hospital. Dr. Berger is unconventional, but he's able to reach Conrad. When Cal notices the differences in his son, he makes an appointment for himself with the doctor. Struggling with his guilt over Conrad's suicide attempt, and a growing disillusionment with his marriage and his wife, he hopes the doctor can help him find out who he is.

Little by little, Conrad makes friends at school, his grades improve, and he begins dating. These things all help him feel more normal and like he's gaining some control over his thoughts and his life. While Conrad's life is coming back together, his parents' lives are falling apart. His father realizes that Beth isn't the perfect person that he thought she was; and Beth is ever more critical about the amount of time Cal spends worrying about Conrad.

Conrad has a big revelation when he sees a poster that reminds him of his brother and he is able to think about a trip they took together without feeling any pain. In fact, he is pleased to note that the memories actually make him feel better. Beth learns from a friend that Conrad quit the swim team and an argument ensues. Beth and Cal continue arguing after Conrad goes to bed widening the gap between the two of them.

After Christmas, Beth and Cal head to Texas to visit her brother and his family. The two of them have a fight that stays with them through the plane ride home. While they're



gone, Conrad copes with the suicide of a girl he met at the hospital and establishes a deeper relationship with Jeannine Pratt—a girl he met in the school Choir. Jeannine tells him about a time in her life when she had many of the same questions and feelings of depression that Conrad did before he tried suicide. She acted out by doing drugs and stealing.

Beth decides to leave Cal. She feels shut out and disillusioned about their relationship. She tells Cal to tell Conrad that she's gone. While Cal is very confused and low, Conrad is feeling renewed. He senses what has happened and doesn't question his father too much. He isn't surprised that his mother left without saying goodbye. He tells his father that he loves him, and Cal replies in kind. This might be the first time these feelings have ever been verbalized. In the epilogue Conrad thinks about his mother and realizes that she loves him in her own way.



# Chapters 1-2, Ordinary People

## Chapters 1-2, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 1. In the beginning of Chapter 1, Conrad Jarrett is having an internal conversation with himself about facing the day. The bare walls of his room make him anxious. He thinks about school as he tries to talk himself into getting out of bed, and he thinks about the hospital where he spent the last 8 months. The other people there made him feel cramped, but he appreciated the sameness and the structure the hospital offered. He has to really concentrate in order to put on a calm face and get out of bed.

Chapter 2. Calvin and Beth Jarrett are Conrad's parents. Cal was raised in an orphanage. His mother put him in the home when he was four. He never knew anything about his father, and he had his mother's maiden name.

Cal became a tax attorney and he makes a good living. He worries about how his son is adjusting now that he's home. He can't understand why people expect Conrad to be unchanged after an attempted suicide. He worries about Conrad's schoolwork, his participation on the swim team, and his inability to connect with old friends. His mother is mostly concerned about how he dresses, but she won't talk directly to him, she asks Cal to do it. Cal is worried about Conrad and tells him to call the psychiatrist the hospital recommended.

## Chapters 1-2, Ordinary People Analysis

The early introduction to this family indicates there are very deep problems boiling under the surface. No one seems to want to address the fact that Conrad was committed to a hospital for attempting suicide. Nor do they want to discuss how he is doing now that he's home. It's apparent that Conrad is not over whatever sent him to the hospital. His father has a passive personality while his mother is controlling and demanding. She is also cold and detached from Conrad. She acts as if nothing is different than it was before he went into the hospital. The stage is being set for some major confrontations and revelations in a family that, up until the suicide attempt, appeared perfect.



# Chapters 3-4, Ordinary People

## Chapters 3-4, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 3. Conrad frets over riding to school with old friends, but doesn't want his mother to drive him. He believes his father can see that everything isn't right with him because of the way he commanded him to call the doctor. He worries that he's causing his father too much stress.

When his friends arrive (members of the swim team), he climbs in the back seat and tries to disappear. The boys make small talk until one of them points out a new girl on the way to school. When he catches Conrad looking at her, he teases him causing Conrad even more anxiety.

At school, Conrad's teachers are solicitous and cautious around him. They suggest he drop some of his extracurricular activities, but he refuses. In choir, Conrad meets the girl he saw on the way to school. Her name is Jeannine Pratt and he's drawn to her.

At swim practice, the coach asks invasive questions about Conrad's time at the hospital, even asking if he had shock treatments. After practice, Conrad finds a picture of the swim team after a relay race. The picture shows him with his arms around his friends. At home, he and his mother barely speak to each other. An encounter with her in the hall leaves him trembling and upset.

Chapter 4. Cal marvels at his wife Beth's beauty as she joins him for lunch at a local restaurant. He notices with pride how people look at her as she passes. She comes in bubbling about their up-coming 21st anniversary. She's also excited about their annual Christmas trip. Cal doesn't want to go because he thinks it's too soon to leave Conrad. Beth insists that what happened to Conrad wasn't their fault, but Cal is adamant. He tries to appease her by saying they'll take a trip in the spring, but she isn't interested.

At work, Ray, Cal's partner, asks if Conrad is taking on too much. The question makes Cal angry, but his anger doesn't last; he knows Ray is thinking of Conrad. His mind is filled with the responsibilities that come with being a father. He thinks about Conrad and his other son, Jordan, who died in a boating accident. He also thinks about Beth and knows that the discussion about the trip isn't over yet.

## Chapters 3-4, Ordinary People Analysis

Conrad is trying hard to appear normal and back to his old self, but he's not fooling many people. He can't keep up with his school work, he's not swimming well, and he's indifferent to almost everything and everyone. Cal is fighting his own demons. He is filled with guilt over having committed Conrad even though he denies it. His guilt is exacerbated when people seem judgmental, but on some level he realizes that he's the

one twisting what has been said because of his guilt. Readers are introduced to the fact that there was another son named Jordan who is now deceased.





# Chapters 5-6, Ordinary People

## Chapters 5-6, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 5. Conrad meets with Dr. Berger, who uses humor to make Conrad comfortable. He asks Conrad why he was in the hospital and learns that he tried to commit suicide by slashing his wrists. In their initial conversation Conrad admits that his father worries about him. When asked if his mother worries, he says that isn't her style. The conversation about his mother seems to make Conrad uncomfortable. He also tells Dr. Berger about his brother and how he died.

Chapter 6. Calvin thinks about the argument he and Beth had over the trip. He asked her to talk to Conrad to see if he would mind if they left, but she won't. Calvin finds himself questioning what kind of man he is, and thinks about Arnold Bacon, his mentor through college and law school. He remembers how the friendship soured when Beth came into Cal's life because Arnold was opposed to his marriage. Eventually, Arnold cut off all contact with him.

## Chapters 5-6, Ordinary People Analysis

Although the storyline has pointed to the possibility that Conrad tried to commit suicide, it isn't actually confirmed until Conrad visits Dr. Berger. Dr. Berger seems to achieve a fairly high level of trust with Conrad in a very short time. He is casual, funny, and totally unorganized, which seems to have an odd appeal for Conrad. It's apparent from their exchange that Conrad is closer to his father than his mother and that realizing that fact makes him uncomfortable.

Through these chapters, the reader can begin to piece together some of the characteristics of Calvin and Conrad. Conrad is short on trust and wants to do things perfectly without causing waves. Calvin doesn't like confrontation and his arguments with Beth linger long after the conflict has ended. Calvin spends a lot of time inside his head trying to figure things out—not just about Conrad, but about himself and his wife too. His brooding mood finally makes sense to him when he realizes it is Jordan's birthday.



# Chapters 7-8, Ordinary People

## Chapters 7-8, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 7. In Chapter 7, Conrad meets with Karen Aldrich, a girl he met in the hospital. She tells him she's doing well and is very involved at school. Conrad tells her about seeing Dr. Berger. She tells him that she and God are the only ones that can help her. This makes Conrad feel guilty about seeing Dr. Berger (and liking him), so he tells her the sessions were his father's idea. When Karen leaves, Conrad is angry because he thinks she just wants to get away from him. She was his only friend in the hospital.

Chapter 8. Cal and Beth attend a party given by neighbors. Cal is reluctant to leave Conrad but Beth is determined to go. At the party, Cal keeps his drink glass filled, drawing pointed stares from Beth. Both are ill at ease when people ask about Conrad, but they react differently. Beth cuts questions short, but Cal shares some of his thoughts. He tells one guest that Conrad is seeing a psychiatrist which earns him a stern reprimand once they're back in the car. Cal makes some observations during the party about how Beth is handling her relationship with Conrad and he doesn't like what he notices, but his displeasure with her actions are clouded by memories of happier times.

## Chapters 7-8, Ordinary People Analysis

Conrad and his friend Karen both try to pretend they're returning to normal. Conrad tells her about seeing Dr. Berger but lies about why he's going. She tells him that she and her father think doctors are a waste of time. This makes the reader wonder if her thoughts are her own or if her father is influencing her. Karen tells Conrad to forget the hospital and the people there because it's too draining; she tells him to get on with life. It may appear to some readers that she is trying to help him move on; others may feel she is a little desperate and that she may be in denial.

Cal is very worried about Conrad, but Beth seems indifferent, almost as if the suicide attempt never occurred. That feeling is reinforced at the party when Beth brushes questions about Conrad aside by telling people he is fine. Denial radiates from her. Cal, on the other hand, wants to talk about Conrad—it makes him feel better. When he tells one of the guests Conrad is seeing a psychiatrist, Beth is enraged. She sees it as an invasion of privacy. While Cal is beginning to notice Beth's attitude around Conrad, his impartiality is clouded by his deep feelings for her. Cracks are beginning to show in their relationship but he doesn't want to admit to them yet.



# Chapters 9-10, Ordinary People

## Chapters 9-10, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 9. In Chapter 9, Conrad takes a mid-term exam and notices a girl that he's known for years struggling with the questions. She is fat and unattractive, but he feels a kinship with her. After class Conrad tries to cheer her up and offers to help her with her work if she'd like. She declines and walks away but not before Stillman, one of the jocks from the swim team, sees them together and teases him about the girl.

Conrad tells Dr. Berger about a disturbing dream he had and how he's having trouble sleeping. Berger suggests his schedule is too full. Conrad admits that he wants to quit swimming, but feels he would look stupid if he did. He tells Berger that the coach is insensitive and relates a stupid remark the coach made. Berger tells him he needs to find a solution.

Chapter 10. Conrad quits the swim team. The coach tells him the decision is final. After practice, Conrad overhears Stillman asking Lazenby why he always has to drag Conrad along everywhere they go. Lazenby tells him they are friends. When Conrad joins them he doesn't mention quitting the team—he doesn't tell his parents, either.

## Chapters 9-10, Ordinary People Analysis

Conrad is finally starting to take some control over parts of his life. He tries to befriend an unattractive classmate at school because he can see some of her in himself. When his friends tease him about her, he is able to walk away without getting defensive. His decision to quit the swim team isn't impulsive—rather it's well-thought out and deliberate. He is able to discuss the decision with Dr. Berger, and he doesn't hesitate when he faces the coach to tell him he's leaving. When the coach tells him the decision is final, he doesn't waffle, but rather just reconfirms his decision. All of these actions seem to indicate that Conrad is gaining some confidence and getting more assertive, but so far it's only with people outside the family. At home he is still covering things up and trying not to make waves.



# Chapter 11-12, Ordinary People

## Chapter 11-12, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 11. In this chapter, Cal bumps into Joe Lazenby's mother and invites her to lunch. As they chat, Carole talks about Beth and her amazing organizational skills. The conversation causes Cal to think about their early years and how out of control she had been with two small children in the house. With friends, Beth laughs those years off, but Cal remembers the hysterics she exhibited when the kids made a mess. The outbursts were so monumental that the whole family became perfectionists so as to keep her happy.

Cal and Beth talk about getting Conrad a car for his Christmas/birthday present. Beth is less than enthusiastic and declines going with Cal to pick the car out. The encounter causes him to recall a conversation he had with his law partner's wife years ago in which she said people would rather live with illusions than with reality and he finally understands what she meant.

Chapter 12. In a session with Dr. Berger, Conrad admits he hasn't told his parents about quitting the swim team. He says he doesn't want his father to worry, and that he and his mother just don't connect. Berger asks Conrad if he ever gets mad; when Conrad says no, Berger challenges him by saying he thinks Conrad is mad right now. Conrad tells him that when he does get angry there seems to be too much anger to handle. Berger tells him he has to let himself feel anger. When Conrad says that anger makes him feel lousy, Berger tells him he has to experience lousy in order to feel better.

On a shopping trip after school, Conrad bumps into Jeannine Pratt and asks her to join him for a soda. They talk about music and family. After she leaves, Conrad sees some ski posters in the window of a travel agency that remind him of a trip he took with Jordan. He is pleasantly surprised when the memories don't bring the pain he's come to expect.

## Chapter 11-12, Ordinary People Analysis

Cal continues to see flaws in Beth that he's never noticed before. When he thinks back on events in their past, he realizes that he's been making excuses for her and that the whole family has had to model their lives around her demands. His thoughts are reinforced when he asks her to go with him to pick out a car for Conrad's birthday and she declines.

While Cal is feeling worse about his life, Conrad is making some gains. He scores an A on a test, gathers his courage to ask Jeannine to join him for a soda, and admits to Berger that he doesn't get angry because he doesn't know how to channel the anger when it breaks loose. He also recognizes that he's learning to put his memories of his brother into perspective and that he can think about him without the pain and confusion

he's felt in the past. The reader can sense the confidence building in him and pulling him back toward normal.



# Chapters 13-14, Ordinary People

## Chapters 13-14, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 13. In Chapter 13, Conrad chooses the Christmas tree at the tree lot and it's apparent that he has some very specific ideas for how they'll celebrate this year. When he and Cal stop for a burger on the way home, Cal is amazed to see Conrad making quick, confident decisions about his meal when just a year ago he couldn't bring himself to eat at all.

At home, Cal recalls how Beth thought a real tree was silly since they already had an artificial tree. When she comes in, she admires the tree and Cal is aware of how much he loves her. Beth says Carole Lazenby was at the meeting and then says that Conrad has something to tell them. Conrad finally confesses leaving the swim team. Cal is worried about why he quit, but Beth is angry that he quit a month ago but didn't tell them. In a rare show of backbone Conrad says he would have told her if he thought she gave a damn. The incident escalates into a 3-way shouting match that ends when Conrad accuses Beth of being more concerned with what other people think than she is about him. He leaves the room in a fit of fury and later tells Cal that he thinks Beth hates him.

Chapter 14. In his next session with Dr. Berger, Conrad talks about the fight. Berger tries to get him to see the value in his anger—how getting it out makes it less harmful to him. He asks if he's tried to talk to his mother but Conrad says he can't—he's too guilty about the suicide attempt and the big mess it made. Berger points out that he needs to forgive her for not being perfect. He tells Conrad she'll never change—if she were going to change she'd have done it when he tried to kill himself. Conrad denies that he did it to try to change her, but when asked why he did do it, he has no answer.

## Chapters 13-14, Ordinary People Analysis

Conrad and his parents finally have a heated confrontation when Beth finds out he quit the swim team. It's the first time he's ever stood up to his mother and is an indication that he's getting better. Beth's doesn't seem concerned about why Conrad quit the team; she's embarrassed by the fact that she heard about it from someone else. Cal is caught in the middle because he loves them both. As is his nature, he tries to smooth things over with Beth, but she shuts him out. As usual, she turns the conversation so that it centers on her and her feelings instead of Conrad's. Conrad tells his father that he thinks Beth hates him; he says he's known for years that she only loved his father and Jordan.



# Chapters 15-16, Ordinary People

## Chapters 15-16, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 15. Beth's parents arrive on Christmas Day. Cal is noticing visible changes in Conrad; his eyes seem brighter. Conrad's father and grandfather surprise him with a car. Conrad says he likes it and takes it for a drive, but Cal is disappointed in his lack of reaction and sulks the rest of the day. That evening he and Beth argue again: it starts over Conrad's reaction to the car, but then other topics like Beth's lingering anger over the trip and Cal's obsession with Conrad's behavior creep in. Even in the middle of their fight he can't help but notice how beautiful she is. He decides they are both grieving, but rather than bringing them together, their grief is breaking them apart.

Chapter 16. In January, Conrad decides to bring some order to his life by making a list of things to work on in the coming year. He looks out the window expecting things to be out of focus—as they have been for so long—but is surprised to find that everything is crystal clear. In the parking lot of the library he notices a girl and marvels at how pretty she is. When he gets home he scrutinizes himself in the mirror for the first time and realizes that he is fairly good looking. In a session with Berger, Conrad tells him about the girl and his newfound obsession with females. His renewed interest in girls causes him to masturbate, after which he feels guilty. Berger tells him it's a tension release and not to worry about it, but suggests he put his energy to better use.

## Chapters 15-16, Ordinary People Analysis

While Conrad seems to be on the mend, Cal and Beth are coming undone. Cal is no longer able to keep Beth on the pedestal where she's been all these years, and Beth is tired of his constant worrying about Conrad. Their fights are more frequent and more intense. Readers may be frustrated with the fact that despite the flaws in Beth's character, Cal is still besotted by her.

While his parents' battle lines are drawn, Conrad is coming back to life. He is beginning to notice girls and be attracted to them. He is able to look at himself in the mirror and like what he sees. He is able to joke with Dr. Berger and to tell him that he's come to think of him as a friend. He is getting better and he likes the sensation.



# Chapters 17-18, Ordinary People

## Chapters 17-18, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 17. While having lunch with Conrad, Cal mentions that he might like to start seeing Dr. Berger—as a patient. Cal meets with Berger and is initially ill at ease. He thinks it's because of Berger's unorthodox looks, but soon realizes that it's his eyes that make him uncomfortable. Cal mentions his guilt over not seeing the suicide attempt coming. Berger is surprised to find that both parents were at home when Conrad cut his wrists. As he's telling Berger about that night, he thinks about Beth's reactions at the time. He tells Berger that he thinks Beth can't forgive Conrad but he's not sure for what.

Chapter 18. Conrad begins finals with an English exam. Though there are only 3 questions on the test, his mind is blank. When he finally gets home after taking Jeannine to her house, his mother's bridge group is there, and Mrs. Lazenby prompts him to visit soon. While Conrad remembers visits at the Lazenby house with fondness, he has not made any effort to reconnect with Joe. He escapes to his room and decides to call Jeannine. While looking up her number he notices Karen's number and impulsively calls her first. Karen is out, so he hangs up and dials Jeannine's number and asks her out.

## Chapters 17-18, Ordinary People Analysis

Cal is feeling the strain of trying to figure out his life. He is confused by his feelings for Beth and about her relationship with Conrad. Cal questions how Beth treats Conrad and her apparent total disinterest in him. His decision to see Berger indicates that he can't figure out his feelings on his own. His admitted skepticism about psychiatrists is resolved as Berger guides him to find his own answers.

Conrad's old insecurities appear as he questions his appeal to girls. He is sure no one would accept a date with him even if he had the courage to ask. He challenges himself though, and makes some progress with Jeannine by offering her a ride home after exams. Later, he works up the courage to ask her out. Initially he is awkward and tells her it doesn't have to be a "date," then recovers smoothly by making a joke and starting over. This exchange shows how much his self-esteem has improved over the past few weeks.





# Chapters 19-20, Ordinary People

## Chapters 19-20, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 19. In Chapter 19, Ray, Cal's business partner, is beginning to notice that all isn't well with Cal. He tells him that he worries too much. Cal says he's thinking of going to Dallas for a couple of weeks and Ray encourages him to go. Ray tells Cal he has to stop worrying about Conrad because he'll soon be leaving for school or making his own life. Ray then shifts his attention to Beth. He tells Cal that their wives had lunch together and that Beth voiced her concern that Cal was worrying too much. Ray's words make Cal wonder how the gap between him and Beth got so big so fast.

Chapter 20. Conrad is surprised at how easy it is to chat with Jeannine's mother when he goes to pick her up for their date. Their evening is filled with laughter and talk about their families. When the date is over, Conrad shows some boldness by holding her hand in the car and kissing her good night.

## Chapters 19-20, Ordinary People Analysis

Cal is forced to take a closer look at his feelings for Conrad and Beth when Ray asks about them. Still trying to maintain the status quo on the outside, his mind is constantly working, trying to unravel the things he is discovering about their relationships. While he worries about Conrad, he is focused on the widening gap between him and Beth. She thinks he is obsessed with Conrad, and Cal thinks that she isn't interested in Conrad at all. Cal feels he should have read Conrad's mood and anticipated the suicide attempt which just adds to his guilt.

Conrad and Jeannine get to know each other better on their date. Jeannine alludes to some mysterious reasons why she, her mother and her brother moved to town, but it moves by so smoothly that Conrad doesn't pick up on it. He gathers enough courage to kiss her goodnight at the end of the evening, and is pleased to feel a heated reaction to their contact. With new-found confidence he asks her out again.



# Chapters 21-22, Ordinary People

## Chapters 21-22, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 21. In Chapter 21, Cal and Beth decide to take a trip to Dallas to visit her brother. Cal finally figures out that he likes order—it's something specific about his personality that he hadn't realized before. His thoughts turn to his mentor, Arnold, and how hurt he was when Arnold cut him out of his life. Cal recalls Arnold saying that Beth wasn't a sharer—that Cal would end up doing all the sharing, and it seems he was right. That thought spurs another memory of when Beth learned about Ray's affair. She told Cal that she would never stay with him if he did something like that because it would be too humiliating.

Chapter 22. Conrad decides to go watch the first swim meet. In the parking lot afterward, Lazenby and some of the others stop to talk to him. Stillman makes an insulting comment about Jeannine that results in a brutal fistfight. Later that evening, Conrad gets a call from Stillman's father saying that he has a broken nose and jaw. Conrad is left alone to contemplate the possible repercussions the fight will cause.

## Chapters 21-22, Ordinary People Analysis

Cal feels that his visits with Dr. Berger are surfacing lots of memories. Facing old demons like his relationship with Arnold are new to him, and he isn't sure he likes the feelings they're causing. The revelation that he can finally say something specific about his personality makes him feel like he's accomplished something; but just as these thoughts are propelling him toward some answers, his brain shuts down and leaves him wondering.

The reader can see from the events in Chapter 22 that Conrad isn't completely free of his demons from the past; but his decision to take his frustration and anger out on Stillman is an indication that he is beginning to vent his anger rather than turn it inward. He admits to Lazenby that seeing him is painful because it reminds him of the strong bond he had with Joe and Jordan.



# Chapters 23-24, Ordinary People

## Chapters 23-24, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 23. In this chapter, Cal finds Conrad asleep on the couch and when he wakes him to go to bed, Conrad tells his father about the fight. Cal presses to find out what started the fight but Conrad brushes it off, saying they just don't like each other. Cal assures him that Stillman is going to be fine and tells him not to worry. Cal is actually pleased that Conrad let his anger out instead of keeping it inside. Upstairs he finds Beth asleep and is outraged that she didn't notice that Conrad wasn't in his bed.

Chapter 24. Cal and Beth head for Dallas leaving Conrad with his grandparents. Cal frets over leaving him alone, but Beth is ready to go. Conrad's grandmother lectures him on first one thing and then another—why his hair is so long, why he didn't get all A's, etc. Conrad and Jeannine plan to go to a movie but her mother asks if they'll stay with Jeannine's little brother instead because she has a date. After they leave, Conrad finds Jeannine crying. She tells him about her parents' split and how she blames the man her mother is dating for the break-up.

## Chapters 23-24, Ordinary People Analysis

Conrad is reassured by his father's reaction to his fight. When Conrad says he thinks Stillman was hurt, Cal tells him not to worry. Cal is relieved because the fight is an indication that he is learning to let his anger out instead of holding it in and expressing it through things like cutting. Cal is angry with Beth when he finds her asleep upstairs because he knows she didn't care enough to check on Conrad before she went to bed. He questions just what kind of mother she is.

Getting ready to leave for the airport Cal is predictably worried about Conrad but Beth comes out and gets in the car with just a cursory "good bye"—no kisses, no hug...nothing. Cal decides she is afraid of people—strangers in particular. At dinner, Conrad listens to his grandparents' exchanges and realizes that somehow this all translates to their acknowledgement that he is getting better. If they were concerned about him, they'd be walking on eggshells. At Jeannine's house, he is able to comfort her when she breaks down about her parents' divorce. The act of giving someone else comfort makes him feel strong and capable.



# Chapters 25-26, Ordinary People

## Chapters 25-26, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 25. In Chapter 25, Cal has just finished an astounding round of golf, and he's visiting with his sister-in-law while Beth and her brother are out. Audrey asks about Conrad and says Beth didn't seem to want to discuss him. Cal realizes that it's getting harder to communicate with Beth. Audrey talks about how Beth loves order and he remembers the conversation he had with Carol Lazenby about Beth's need to be organized and in control. He knows this isn't always true. Shortly after the Coast Guard found the boys' boat with only one person on board, Cal found her in the backyard crying but trying hard not to. It was the only time since he'd known her that he'd seen her cry.

Chapter 26. Conrad is faced with the most difficult night he's had since the suicide attempt. He sees an article in the paper about his friend Karen's suicide. Visibly shaken, Conrad tells his grandparents he has a headache and goes to bed. In the bedroom, he has flashbacks to the hospital and the time he spent with Karen. Then he begins to think about the night on the boat when Jordan died. A long walk outside in the middle of the night doesn't do much to clear his head, so he calls Dr. Berger and asks to meet with him.

## Chapters 25-26, Ordinary People Analysis

Beth's cold, disconnected personality is becoming ever more apparent. She barely says good bye to Conrad when they leave for Dallas. She won't talk to Cal on the plane, and cuts him off when he tries to initiate a conversation. She won't discuss Conrad with her sister-in-law, and insists to anyone who asks that everything is fine. Cal is questioning whether he ever really knew Beth. He is seeing many flaws in her personality and he is confused about the state of their marriage.

Karen's suicide could have pushed Conrad back into his depression. His discovery of the article in the paper catches him completely off-guard. The fact that he is at his grandparents' house and the late hour compound the problem because he has no one to talk to. It speaks volumes about how far he has come in his recovery that he is able to channel his anger and grief into memories and walking rather than self destruction. His determination to get through the night and his acknowledgement that he needs help show the progress he has made.



# Chapters 27-28, Ordinary People

## Chapters 27-28, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 27. In Dr. Berger's office, Conrad reveals a lot of pent-up guilt and frustration triggered by Karen's suicide. He admits to Berger that he thinks Jordan's death was his fault. Berger points out that he couldn't see his brother and that his brother was the stronger swimmer, so his guilt can only stem from the fact that he (the less perfect brother) survived. Berger accuses him of trying to become perfect and says the strain of that is what finally made him snap.

Chapter 28. In Dallas, Cal and Beth have a confrontation when Beth suggests another vacation and Cal makes the assumption that she means for all of them. Beth accuses him of over-protecting Conrad and he accuses her of making every conversation about her. Beth says she doesn't know what Conrad expects of her and says she thinks his suicide attempt was also an attempt to kill her. Cal is appalled by the suggestion, but it triggers memories of the night they found Conrad. He tells her Conrad thinks she hates him. She tells him she could never hate her son, and is angry that he would let Conrad express such a thing.

## Chapters 27-28, Ordinary People Analysis

Karen's suicide triggers a flood of memories for Conrad. He rushes to Dr. Berger's office because he's afraid he'll try to hurt himself again. His feelings unleash a torrent of tears and pent up emotions that Berger says are natural. Conrad talks about the guilt he feels for letting his brother die, but Berger tells him there was nothing he could have done to change the outcome. He tells him he has to work through his guilt about Jordan in order to feel other things. This session allows Conrad to let out months of built-up pain and grief, and to face things he has suppressed. At home he is able to study his scars, and cry, and—most telling—he is finally able to sleep.

The blow-up between Cal and Beth has been a long time coming. In a rare show of feelings, Beth lets her tears flow and rages against the boating accident and Conrad's suicide attempt. She feels Conrad was trying to hurt—even kill—her and that he and everyone else thinks his suicide attempt was her fault. Cal is hopelessly caught in a spiral of love for her—he wants to help her—but he's also deeply concerned about Conrad and his own guilt for not anticipating the suicide attempt. He is very aware that the gap between him and Beth is getting wider.



# Chapters 29-30, Ordinary People

## Chapters 29-30, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 29. In this chapter, Beth and Cal fly home. On the plane they don't speak. Cal's head is filled with a list of clichés that seem to sum up his life. Phrases like "haste makes waste" and "a rolling stone gathers no moss" are in his head, but they make no sense; in fact, he thinks some of them are silly. At home they have a pleasant dinner. Cal senses something different about Conrad, and when he crosses the room to kiss his mother goodnight, those feelings are confirmed. Beth says little during the evening, and the kiss seems to throw her into a speculative daze. Conrad tells Cal that he's glad to have them home.

Chapter 30. After spending the evening together, Conrad and Jeannine finally end up making love. Jeannine builds Conrad's confidence and self-esteem by telling him what a good composer he is and offering to write down some of his songs. In bed, she confesses to him that she isn't a virgin, and begins to tell him about her life. She talks about the time right after her parents divorced and how she fell in with a rough crowd. She says she stole and did drugs, and tells him that when she got caught stealing, her mother decided they should move to Lake Forest. She asks Conrad about his scars and if it hurt when he did it. He opens up to her—something he hasn't done with anyone except his doctors. Conrad wonders out loud why he doesn't feel like killing himself anymore.

## Chapters 29-30, Ordinary People Analysis

Beth and Cal have reached an impasse in their relationship. Her refusal to talk to Cal on the flight home is typical of her personality. She draws inside herself, shutting everyone and everything else out. Cal is perplexed, and not as upset as one might expect considering his marriage is falling apart. At home he notices a visible change in Conrad's demeanor and attitude, and is taken aback by his actions when Conrad kisses his mother goodnight. He notices that Beth has little reaction to the kiss. He is surprised when Conrad says he's glad they're home—and it seems like he genuinely means it.

Conrad's evolution continues as he talks to Beth after they make love. The fact that he's able to tell her about the suicide attempt is huge. He realizes that he doesn't feel like hurting himself anymore and that makes him feel good. He feels protective, and strong, and at peace with himself.



# Chapters 31-Epilogue, Ordinary People

## Chapters 31-Epilogue, Ordinary People Summary

Chapter 31. In Chapter 31, Beth decides to leave the family. She tells Cal that he has changed too much and that she can't stand the way he looks at her. She refuses to tell Conrad—she leaves that to Cal. Cal has tried to get her to go to counseling, but she is concerned with what it will look like. The few people they've told are shocked, as they always appeared to be the perfect couple. Cal still loves her, but he also knows now that love isn't enough. He feels she pushes people away and he doesn't understand it.

Cal tells Conrad that Beth has gone on a trip. When Conrad asks why Cal didn't go, the pieces start coming together. Cal decides to sell the house, but he can't bring himself to say the word divorce yet. When Conrad realizes that his mother left without saying goodbye, he is furious and accuses Cal of trying to shield him from the truth for fear he'll try suicide again. Conrad apologizes and finally tells his father that he loves him and Cal responds in kind.

Epilogue. In the novel's Epilogue, Conrad finally makes the effort to renew his friendship with Joe Lazenby. Joe is cool and picks things up just as if the last year or so never happened. When Joe goes into his house to see if his mother will let him out of his chores so he and Conrad can play golf, Conrad's mind wanders. He and his father have moved to a smaller house. During the move, he was surprised to find a box of childhood mementos (his and Jordan's) that Beth had kept tucked away. These mementos have helped him understand her better. Conrad keeps up with his mother's movements through his grandparents. He plans to see her when she comes home because he knows he loves her, and he also knows that she loves him even though they can't be together.

## Chapters 31-Epilogue, Ordinary People Analysis

Cal is in denial and tells Conrad that Beth is traveling to clear her head. While Conrad is angry and hurt that his mother left without saying goodbye, he seems to want her to return. The events of the morning finally allow him to confront his father about his over-protectiveness. He tells Cal to back off and stop worrying all the time. The walls are coming down between father and son, and they are finally talking.

Conrad seems to have grown up and recovered. He has put his relationships into perspective and is now making efforts to mend some—his friendship with Lazenby—and to let others go—his love for his mother. He recognizes that love isn't perfect or organized, but that it's real and necessary and he's ready to accept that.



# Characters

## Conrad Jarrett

The youngest son of Beth and Calvin Jarrett, Conrad attempts suicide and spends eight months in a mental hospital for his efforts. He is struggling to get his life back to some semblance of normalcy away from the hospital and back in school.

## Calvin Jarrett

Father of Conrad and Jordan and husband to Beth, Calvin is a tax attorney who is very quiet and soft-spoken. He doesn't like confrontation and has spent most of his life both besotted with and browbeaten by his wife.

## Beth Jarrett

Conrad's mother, Beth is a driven perfectionist and extremely controlling individual; she is unable to deal with Conrad's suicide attempt so close on the heels of losing Jordan in a boating accident. Though everyone sees her as perfect, Cal recognizes that she is actually chaotic, stubborn and impulsive.

## Jordan Jarrett

Jordan is the son of Calvin and Beth, and Conrad's older brother. He was killed in a boating accident two years before the story begins. Conrad feels responsible for his death.

## Dr. Berger

Dr. Berger is the unconventional psychiatrist who helps Conrad crawl out the mental hole he has been in and in the process becomes a good friend.

## Dr. Crawford

Dr. Crawford is the doctor Conrad saw while in the hospital. He recommended Dr. Berger.

## Ray Hanley

Ray Handly is Cal's law partner and best friend since law school.





## **Joe Lazenby**

Joe, Conrad, and Jordan were all good friends and teammates on the swim team before Jordan died and Conrad attempted suicide.

## **Carol Lazenby**

Carol is Joe's mother; she's a good friend of Cal and Beth.

## **Kevin Stillman**

Kevin is a jock from the swim team who gives Conrad a hard time. The two of them eventually get into a fist fight in which Conrad breaks Kevin's nose.

## **Jeannine Pratt**

Jeannine is the girl Conrad falls for and eventually takes to bed. He finds a kinship with her that helps him rebuild his self-esteem and confidence.

## **Karen Aldrich**

Karen is the girl Conrad met in the hospital. She seems to be doing well, but ends up committing suicide.

## **Arnold Bacon**

Arnold was the lawyer who took Cal under his wing while still in high school and encouraged him to go to law school. When Cal decides to marry Beth, Arnold severs all ties with him.

## **Howard and Ellen Butler**

Howard and Ellen are Beth's parents.

## **Wade and Audrey Butler**

Wade and Audrey are Beth's brother and sister-in-law who live in Texas.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Lake Forest, Illinois**

Lake Forest, Illinois is the town where the story takes place.

### **Lake Forest High School**

Conrad (and, at one time, his brother Jordan) attends school at Lake Forest High School.

### **Dr. Berger's Office**

A lot like the doctor himself, Dr. Berger's office feels ruffled and disorganized, yet full of energy and hope.

### **Conrad's Room**

Conrad spends a lot of time in his room questioning himself and escaping from the people and realities around him.

### **Cal's Office**

Cal's law office is located near Dr. Berger's office giving Cal the opportunity to suggest that he and Conrad ride home together after Conrad's sessions.

### **The Boat**

Conrad and Jordan took the boat out onto the lake, and when it capsized in bad weather, Jordan drowned.

### **The Swim Team**

Conrad, Jordan, and Joe Lazenby ruled the swim team at one time, but it became too big a reminder of his past after Jordan died and Conrad's suicide attempt, so he quit.



# Themes

## Depression and Grief

The book invests a lot of time delving into the characteristics of depression and grief and the ways different people react to them. Interestingly, the author never refers directly to depression, but rather all of the elements of the human psyche that cause people to feel out of control and as if there is no hope. As Conrad is slowly but surely putting his demons to rest, he discovers that others have many similar feelings, and that they all handle them differently. He sees that many people suffer deep regret and guilt for the things they have done in the past, and by talking to Dr. Berger and Jeannine about his feelings, he is able to manage his own grief and feel better about himself.

## Family Relationships

The relationships in Conrad's family are all over the place. Conrad is convinced that his mother hates him because of the suicide attempt and that she blames him for Jordan's death. Calvin slowly discovers that his "perfect" wife is anything but perfect. He discovers that she is flawed on many levels but that he has always been too blinded by his love for her to notice. As Beth begins to resent his relationship with Conrad she is less able to hide her feelings until finally Calvin begins to call her on her lack of concern for Conrad. What people once thought was the perfect family deteriorates and finally completely fractures. The hard truths that each of them has to face puts a strain on the relationship between Beth and Calvin, but it solidifies the connection between Conrad and his father. As Conrad finds himself, he is also able to be more forgiving of his mother and acknowledges that she loves him but that they'll never be close.

## Self-image

Conrad has no self-esteem at the beginning of the book. He can't look at himself in the mirror; he can't imagine people wanting to have anything to do with him, and he certainly doesn't envision himself with a girl. He blames himself for his brother's death, for leaving a mess in the bathroom when he tried to commit suicide, and for losing a grade in school when he went into the hospital—as he sees it he has absolutely nothing to offer anyone. Through his work with Dr. Berger and his relationship with Jeannine, he is finally able to see some of his good points. He begins to make friends again; he is able to enjoy memories about his past without feeling guilt, and he decides he has a lot to offer.

# Style

## Point of View

The narrative of *Ordinary People* is told through the thoughts of the characters (mostly Conrad's and Cal's), dialogue, and through a few flashbacks. Conrad's thoughts are often clues to how he is feeling, and early on they are filled with his distorted images of himself and his life. As the book progresses, Conrad's thoughts show his transition back into the real world. Calvin is the other character whose thoughts are primary in the book. His thoughts focus on Conrad's well-being and his disintegrating relationship with the woman he thought was the perfect wife.

## Setting

The story takes place in Lake Forest, Illinois. It is right before Christmas and the weather is seasonably cold. The story unfolds over the course of that year but with flashbacks to the year before, when Conrad's brother Jordan dies in a boating accident and Conrad attempts suicide. Most of the action in the story takes place in the high school, the Jarrett home, and Dr. Berger's office.

## Language and Meaning

The book is very conversational. The characters are well-educated and that is reflected in their word choices and phrasing. Words the author uses set the tone for the emotions of the characters in the book. The reader can feel the anguish Conrad is experiencing as he tries to drag himself out of bed and get ready to face another day at school. The reader is also drawn into Calvin's crushing awareness that his wife isn't all that he thought she was, and his sense his bewilderment that he didn't recognize her flaws sooner. Beth's disconnection from Conrad is harder to figure out, but the language of the book characterizes her as cold, domineering, controlling, and self-indulgent.

## Structure

The book is thirty-one chapters long. As the chapters unfold, the reader is introduced to the Jarrett family and sees how each of them is coping (or failing to cope) with the death of one child and the attempted suicide of another. The book is like an onion in that the author reveals small bits of information about each character intertwined with tendrils of information that tie them and the past together. The chronological order of the events, supplemented with flashback to fill in the gaps, makes the book easy to follow and lends realism to the characters.



## Quotes

"But what has he failed at? He's never failed at anything!"  
Chapter 8, Ordinary People page 70

"Nothing's new, nothing's on my mind. I don't think anything. I don't feel anything."  
Chapter 12, Ordinary People page 98

"I'm sure I would have told you if I thought you gave a damn!"  
Chapter 13, Ordinary People page 109

"So much of the worrying you do is about losing your kids. And, in the end, you lose them anyway. So what's the point?"  
Chapter 19, Ordinary People page 162

"I can't help it; it hurts too much to be around you."  
Chapter 22, Ordinary People page 182

"The thing that hurts you is sitting on yourself. Not letting yourself connect with your own feelings. It is screwing you up, leading you off on chases that don't go anywhere."  
Chapter 27, Ordinary People page 225

"No sense taking the questions seriously, if there aren't any answers."  
Chapter 30, Ordinary People page 250

"Well what do you expect from an emotional cripple? That's what you've been trying to tell me, isn't it? That's what you really think of me. I won't have it, Cal. I won't have you wringing your hands over me the way you have over him."  
Chapter 31, Ordinary People page 253

"I'm not disappointed, I love you, man."  
Chapter 31, Ordinary People page 259

## Topics for Discussion

How and why does Conrad push his friends away when he returns to school—especially Joe Lazenby? What reaction do his friends have to this behavior?

How do you think Cal is handling Conrad's return home? What is he overdoing? What could he do differently to make things smoother?

What do you think of how Beth is handling Conrad's return? What emotions do you see her display as the book unfolds and how does she handle them?

What tactics does Dr. Berger use to get Conrad to confront his problems? What actions does he encourage him to take to start regaining control of his life?

Why does Beth finally decide to leave Cal? What prompts her to leave without speaking to Conrad? What surprises or shocks you about Conrad's reactions?

How do Beth and Cal compare as parents? How does Conrad feel about each of his parents? How does Dr. Berger address the relationships within Conrad's family?

What is the significance of Conrad's relationship with Jeannine in the narrative? What does Jeannine represent to Conrad? How do these characters relate to one another?