

Out of My Mind Study Guide

Out of My Mind by Sharon Draper

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Contents

[Out of My Mind Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 3](#)

[Chapters 1-6..... 5](#)

[Chapters 7-12..... 7](#)

[Chapters 13-21..... 9](#)

[Chapters 22-27..... 11](#)

[Chapters 28-33..... 13](#)

[Characters..... 15](#)

[Objects/Places..... 18](#)

[Themes..... 20](#)

[Style..... 22](#)

[Quotes..... 24](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 25](#)



Plot Summary

Out of My Mind is a novel by Sharon M. Draper. In this novel, Melody Brooks is an eleven-year-old girl with cerebral palsy. Melody's body is stiff and uncooperative, forcing her to use a wheelchair. Her mind works well, but she cannot speak. Melody hates her boring special education classes and the fact that she cannot make her thoughts and opinions known, even to her parents. Hence Melody has to fight to get what she wants. Eventually, Melody is given a computer that helps her speak and communicate in a regular fifth grade class. Melody even gets the opportunity to participate in a trivia competition. Unfortunately, even great success cannot change opinions of those who cannot see beyond the physical. This is a fact Melody is forced to face despite everything she accomplishes. Out of My Mind is a brilliant novel that takes the reader into the world of an amazing eleven year old girl who eventually realizes she is no different from the kids around her despite her body's disabilities.

Melody Brooks was born with cerebral palsy. Her parents have done all they can to help her live a normal life, but life is often frustrating for Melody because she cannot speak or communicate her wishes. In fact, Melody was even diagnosed as profoundly retarded when she was five. Despite this, Melody's mother enrolled her in public school to give her the opportunities she needed to succeed.

Mrs. V., Melody's neighbor, is a kind, but tough woman, who pushes Melody to do the best she can. Mrs. V. was not content to allow three year old Melody to rely on her parents for everything. For this reason, Mrs. V. forced Melody to learn how to roll over and how to crawl. Mrs. V. even taught Melody how to catch herself whenever she fell from her wheelchair. These things helped Melody become more self-sufficient. However, Melody continues to be reliant on her parents to feed her, to help her go to the bathroom, and she would never learn to speak.

When Melody is eight, her mother becomes pregnant. Melody can overhear them talking about the new baby and their fears that she will suffer the same disabilities as Melody. Melody feels guilty and ashamed when she overhears these conversations. However, even Melody is happy when the baby, Penny, is born perfectly normal.

As Penny grows and matures, Melody feels a little jealous that a baby is doing all the things she will never be able to do. However, Melody adores her little sister and is pleased with the pleasure the baby brings her parents.

When Melody begins fifth grade, the new teacher brings a great deal of change, including an inclusion program that allows the special education children to join normal classes. Melody even gets an aide to help her with the classes. Melody enjoys the classes, but she dislikes the way the other students assume that she is stupid. Even the teacher assumes Melody cannot participate and is surprised when she not only participates, but passes the test exam of a trivia competition with a perfect score.



Melody participates in the qualifying exam to be part of the trivia competition and once again surprises everyone when she makes the team. Melody then helps the team win the qualifying competition to win a trip to Washington, D.C. for the national competition. However, on the day the group is to fly to Washington, Melody learns her flight has been canceled due to weather, but the rest of the team has made an earlier flight without her.

The following day, Melody insists on going to school. It is raining and Melody's mother is tired, sick, and frustrated. Therefore, when Melody kicks, hits, and screams to warn her mother that Penny has slipped out of the house and is in the path of the car, her mother fails to understand. Penny is hit by the car and injured. Melody feels bad for not being able to warn her mother even though everyone, especially Mrs. V. assures her it is not her fault. In the end, Melody learns that Penny is going to be fine. Her class also apologizes for their lack of consideration toward her.



Chapters 1-6

Chapters 1-6 Summary

In Chapter 1, although surrounded by words, Melody cannot speak.

In Chapter 2, Melody cannot walk, talk, feed herself, or take herself to the bathroom, all things that bother her. However, she can work a television remote and move her wheelchair. Melody often watches videos her father has made of her over the years. She sees worry on her parents' faces and sadness as she grows and she is unable to do many of things other children can do. Despite her body's stiffness and often uncontrolled movements, her mind works. She loves music, she even sees colors when she listens to it. Her favorite type of music is country and she loves a song called Elvira. However, she cannot express this to her mother, so they often listen to her mother's favorite classical music.

In Chapter 3, Melody can remember often falling onto the floor as a child and having to wait for someone to move her. She can also remember her father talking to her a lot, and not like she were a baby but like she was an adult. Melody's father would take her outside to see the stars or feel the weather on her skin. He read to her most nights, even if he was tired after work. Melody can remember every one of these books. Melody believes she has a photographic memory. However, she cannot express herself and sometimes frustration causes her to have what she calls tornado explosions. Once she had one of these in the store and she remembers her mother growing frustrated and embarrassed, and rushing her out to the car.

In Chapter 4, Melody has seen a lot of doctors in her life. When it was time for school, Melody saw a special doctor whose job it was to test her level of intelligence. The man treated Melody like she was retarded and did not understand her answers to some of the questions she asked. Hence, he told her mother that Melody was profoundly retarded and should be placed in a facility where she could be properly cared for. Melody's mother became angry, defending Melody to the doctor. Then Melody's mother enrolled her in public school.

In Chapter 5, Melody attends Spaulding Street Elementary School. For five years, she has been in the same classroom with the same kids. Every year there is a new teacher and each has their own style of teaching. Melody likes all the kids in the class, but she is not challenged there. The only way she can communicate is from words glued to a tray on her wheelchair, limiting her vocabulary to a few simple words and phrases. It is frustrating to her.

In Chapter 6, Mrs. V. is Melody's neighbor. She is the only person her parents trust for Melody to be cared for. Mrs. V. is a tough woman who, when Melody was three, forced her to learn to roll over, crawl, and catch herself when she falls from her wheelchair. It



was also Mrs. V.'s idea to add more to Melody's communication board. Mrs. V. taught Melody to read and expanded her vocabulary.

Chapters 1-6 Analysis

These early chapters introduce the main character, Melody Brooks. Melody is an eleven year old girl who is a highly intelligent girl stuck in a broken body. For this reason, Melody can hear, see, and understand all around her, but she cannot interact with it. It is a frustrating experience for Melody that has led her to struggle in her personal relationships. Not even Melody's parents understand what she needs most of the time.

Melody has been tested as retarded, but she has managed to prove to those closest to her that she is smart. Mrs. V., Melody's neighbor and babysitter, knows how smart Melody is and she pushes her to do the best she can. Mrs. V. pushes Melody harder than even her own parents do. This helps Melody not hide behind her inabilities and do the best she can do.

Melody attends school, but the class is filled with other children with similar problems and the teachers often do not try to teach them. There is a new teacher every year, therefore when a good one comes along, they often do not stay long. It is a frustrating process for Melody, who watches the other children at recess and dreams of being just like them.



Chapters 7-12

Chapters 7-12 Summary

In Chapter 7, Melody has had good teachers, like Mrs. Tracy, who figured out Melody liked to listen to books on tape and gave her many to listen to. However, there have also been bad teachers, like Mrs. Billups, who takes six months to review the alphabet with the students and plays baby songs each morning. One day, having had enough of Mrs. Billups' routines, Melody has a tornado explosion that causes the other students to become unruly. Mrs. Billups calls Melody's mother, who tells Mrs. Billups everything Melody cannot. Mrs. Billups quits a short time later.

In Chapter 8, when she was young, Melody had a fish she called Ollie. Melody loved to watch Ollie swim in circles in his bowl. One day Ollie jumped out of the bowl. Melody called for her mother, but she did not come. Melody tried to splash water on the dying fish, but it did not help. When her mother finally came, she accused Melody of spilling the fish out and killing it. A while after Ollie died, Melody's dad gave her a dog for her birthday. Melody called Butterscotch. Once Butterscotch helped Melody by alerting her mother after Melody fell out of her wheelchair while watching a movie in her room.

In Chapter 9, when Melody was eight, her world changed. Her mother became pregnant. Melody can remember her parents talking about the possibility that the baby would have a disability like Melody and how much this frightened them. However, when Penny was born, she was perfect. Taking care of two children who required so much care was hard on Melody's mother, but they managed alright. Melody is somewhat jealous of Penny's normal development and the attention her parents pay to her, but she loves her anyway.

In Chapter 10, Melody has learned to communicate with her mother without words. She even teases her sometimes, like when she teased her for being fat after Penny was born. However, wordless communication does not always work. Like the time Melody wanted a Big Mac, but could not make this clear to her father.

Chapter 11. Fifth grade has just begun. Melody has recently gotten an electric wheelchair, making it easier for her to get around on her own. Her new teacher, Mrs. Shannon, is making a lot of changes, including an inclusion program that allows the special education kids to join some of the regular classes. The first class they join is music. Some of the kids are cruel, laughing and making fun of the special education kids. However, some are nice, like Rose, the girl Melody sits beside.

Chapter 12. By the end of October, there are more classes the special education kids can join. Some have joined art and science, while Melody gets to join the language arts and history classes. Mrs. Shannon also tells Melody's parents that she has arranged for Melody to have a personal aide to help her in class. Melody is very excited when she meets Catherine, her aide. Catherine helps Melody by feeding her at lunch, helping her



go the bathroom, and writing down her answers to tests and class work. However, Melody finds there are still many things she cannot participate in, such as a game of trivia in her history class.

Chapters 7-12 Analysis

Melody has struggled with her inability to communicate all her life. Even Melody's parents do not fully understand the things she is trying to communicate because her body movements are erratic and her verbal abilities are limited. For this reason, it is difficult for Melody to express not only her wants and desires, but to interact in classroom situations. Therefore, no one knows for sure just how smart Melody is and this is a very frustrating thing for her.

Melody's parents had a second child and the pregnancy was filled with concerns about the health of the child. When the baby is born healthy, the stress is gone from Melody's parents. However, Melody finds herself jealous not so much because of the normal sibling rivalries, but because Penny can do all the things Melody cannot and she is only two. It is a difficult situation for Melody to see her parents reveling in the health and normalcy of their second child while Melody is stuck in a body that does not work with a heart and mind that work perfectly.

As fifth grade begins, Melody finds herself with a teacher who not only realizes how smart Melody is, but who wants to change things and make things more challenging for Melody. It is exactly what Melody needs, but her inability to communicate continues to be an obstacle for her.



Chapters 13-21

Chapters 13-21 Summary

In Chapter 13, Mrs. V. has begun to babysit Penny as well. Penny has become something of an escape artist, increasing the need for supervision. One day, Mrs. V. tells Melody that she has won six tickets to the new aquarium downtown. Mrs. V. promises to take Melody and her family, but they need one more. When Melody suggests Rose, Mrs. V. quickly agrees. It is all arranged and Melody is thrilled when the day arrives. However, two girls from school are there as well and they make fun of Melody and Rose for being there with Melody.

In Chapter 14, Melody returns to school after Thanksgiving break to find that Rose has gotten a new laptop. Rose tells Catherine that she would like one to help her communicate.

In Chapter 15, Catherine helps Melody research such products on the computer and they finally find a Medi-Talker, a computer that can speak for Melody with a simple touch. Melody takes prints from the website home and shows Mrs. V. Mrs. V. talks to Melody's mother and they quickly begin the process to purchase one. When the Medi-Talker arrives, Melody is so excited that she cannot wait for Mrs. V. to finish reading the instructions. Together they begin programming names, words, and phrases into the machine. Melody's parents are very excited the first time she uses it to speak to them.

In Chapter 16, when Melody returns to school after Christmas break, she makes a big show of the Medi-Talker in class.

In Chapter 17, one afternoon, the history teacher, Mr. Dimming, has the kids take a practice test for the upcoming Whiz Kids competition. Melody participates using her Medi-Talker's printing function. When Catherine turns in Melody's answers, Mr. Dimming is surprised to find she participated. At the end of the class, Mr. Dimming announces that Melody passed the test with a perfect score. Mr. Dimming then tells the class that they should study so they can take the qualifying test the following week. Unfortunately, to encourage the other kids, he makes a derogatory remark about Melody.

In Chapter 18, when Mrs. V. finds out what Mr. Dimming said, he tells Melody she should study hard and take the test. Melody eventually agrees and they study all afternoon. Even Catherine helps, allowing Melody to listen to educational tapes at school.

In Chapter 19, on the Saturday before the test, Melody sits on Mrs. V.'s porch with her mother, Penny, and Mrs. V. When her father comes home, Penny tries to go to the car to go for a ride. She loves to ride in the car.

In Chapter 20, Melody is very nervous about taking the test. When she enters the room for the test, some of the other kids object to her even trying. Mr. Dimming, too, seems to



have doubts, but he agrees to allow her to try. The test proves to be a little harder, but Melody thinks she has done well.

In Chapter 21, on the following day, Melody is nervous about the results of the test. Therefore, when it comes time for the names to be read, she feels as though her heart is beating loud enough for everyone to hear. When Mr. Dimming reads out the names of those who will be on the team, even he seems surprised to find Melody's name there. However, he gives a nice speech that expresses his surprise and delight. Then Melody asks Catherine to take her away because her excitement is causing her to make strange sounds.

Chapters 13-21 Analysis

Melody desperately wants to be like all the other kids, therefore she is excited to go to the aquarium with her new friend, Rose. However, the day is nearly ruined when some other kids from school make fun of Rose for going with Melody. It is an intolerance that Mrs. V. and Melody's mother find it difficult to ignore. It is clear that Melody will face a lot of this type of behavior, especially when a teacher does the same thing, but also clear that Melody has a strong support system.

Melody learns about a device that can help her speak to those around her. This is what Melody has been dreaming of her whole life, a way to communicate. When the device comes, she is so excited that she cannot wait to try it. Mrs. V. helps her program it and soon Melody is communicating in a way that has never been possible for her. This changes Melody's whole look on life. Now she can participate in class, tell her parents what she is feeling and what she wants, and speak to her friends like any other kid. It is an exciting time for Melody.

It is time for the Whiz Kid competition and Mr. Dimmings prepares the kids by giving them a practice test. Everyone is shocked when Melody gets a perfect score. Everyone, that is, but Melody. Most think it was a fluke, until Melody does it again on the official qualifying exam. Melody wins a place on the team, but not everyone is happy about it. Some of the kids in the class, especially Molly and Claire, two girls who have made fun of and discriminated against Melody before, do not think she should be on the team. However, Mr. Dimmings makes room for her.



Chapters 22-27

Chapters 22-27 Summary

In Chapter 22, Melody and the other kids on the team study like crazy for the next two weeks. Melody likes being included in the practice sessions, but finds that the conversation often moves too fast for her to participate. When the class has pizza, Melody is embarrassed that she cannot share because she cannot feed herself.

In Chapter 23, on the day of the competition, Melody is nervous. However, when she arrives at the studio, she discovers that a stage hand who has a son in a wheelchair, has been able to make a special answer board for her to participate. The rest of her team arrives and they are all just as nervous.

In Chapter 24, the first round goes well for Melody's team. They win with a good score. They have to wait for the other teams to compete to see which two teams have the highest score for the final round. Most of the kids talk to Melody and congratulate her on her answers.

In Chapter 25, Melody and her team are one of the best two and are to play in the final round. It is a tough round, but Melody's team wins by a single point. Melody is so excited that she begins to make funny noises and her body twitches. The kids on her team are embarrassed. Afterwards, they are all interviewed by reporters, but the reporters seem most interested in Melody.

In Chapter 26, the team decides to go out to dinner and Melody joins them. When they reach the restaurant, there is no handicap access, so Melody's mother has to pull her up the stairs. When the food arrives, Melody is embarrassed when her mother has to feed her. However, it seems more embarrassing when Claire vomits.

In Chapter 27, Melody is pictured on the front page of the newspaper the following day. While Melody's parents are excited, Melody knows that the rest of her teammates will not like that. When Melody gets to Mr. Dimmings' class, she finds that even Rose is annoyed by the newspaper article. Mr. Dimmings then tells the kids they will have practice every day after school and half a day on Saturday. Melody is worried about this, but she is mostly worried because she knows they do not want her on the team. Catherine, however, cheers her up.

Chapters 22-27 Analysis

Melody makes the Whiz Kid team and proves herself to be the smartest member of the team. When they go for the competition that will decide which school will go to Washington, D.C., special arrangements have been made for Melody to participate. Melody does well and her team wins. However, in the celebration afterward it is still clearer that many do not know how to deal with Melody's differences. Melody herself is

embarrassed by the fact that her mother has to feed her, something that causes her to stand out from the others.

Melody's participation in the Whiz Kid competition catches the attention of the media. They make a big deal of Melody's handicaps and this causes some jealousy and unhappiness among the other members of the team, even Melody's friend, Rose. Melody feels like an outcast, as though she is unwanted, but Catherine talks her out of it. However, it remains a difficult time for Melody as she tries to participate in something normal and finds herself continuously limited, not by her own disabilities, but by the lack of acceptance and support from her classmates and teachers.



Chapters 28-33

Chapters 28-33 Summary

In Chapter 28, for two weeks Melody and her team works hard for the two weeks leading up to the Washington competition. Melody is happy to learn she is part of the team that will compete, rather than being an alternate. The days before the competition are filled with chaos as Melody's family prepares for the trip. Melody buys cards for Mrs. V. and Catherine to thank them for their help. They pack and the day of the trip they leave early for the airport. However, when they arrive they learn their plane has been cancelled due to weather and that the rest of the team left on an earlier flight.

In Chapter 29, Melody lies in bed all day, depressed that her team would purposely leave her behind. Mr. Dimmings calls, but does not have a suitable excuse for his actions.

In Chapter 30, the next day, Melody insists on going to school even though she has an excuse not to go due to the competition. Melody's mother feels bad and is annoyed when she is called in to work. This is compounded by the insistent rain. Therefore, when they are ready to leave and Melody sees Penny slip out the front door, her mother is not receptive to Melody's attempts to communicate, without her Medi-Talker, the danger. Melody's mother hits Penny as she pulls out of the drive.

In Chapter 31, Melody stays with Mrs. V. while her parents are at the hospital with Penny. Melody tells Mrs. V. how guilty she feels and Mrs. V. tries to console her, but they are both frightened for Penny. Melody is especially concerned about Penny's mental capacities.

In Chapter 32, Melody returns to school on Monday. When she goes to Mr. Dimmings' class, she demands to know what happened. They are honest with her about why she was not included in a breakfast they all attended that allowed them to reach the airport so early. Then they try to give her the ninth place trophy they win, but Melody accidentally breaks it by pushing it from her communications tray.

In Chapter 33, Penny comes home from the hospital with a broken leg and bumps and bruises, but whole. Melody continues to work in her inclusion classes.

Chapters 28-33 Analysis

It comes time for the Whiz Kids team to go to Washington, D.C. Melody is as excited as the others, racing through the extra work required for her care on the trip. However, when she reaches the airport she finds out her team left without her. Melody's parents are very upset and angry that something like this could happen to her. Melody is depressed by what seems like a purposeful action. It is difficult time for her that only

grows worse when Melody is not able to warn her mother that Penny has gotten out of the house and is in the way of the moving car.

Melody's life is a difficult one. It does not help that even her parents do not always understand her and that she is discriminated against by her classmates and her teacher. However, Melody is a resilient young girl who found a way to speak and will find a way to endure and survive the inability of others to see her as a normal girl stuck in a broken body.



Characters

Melody Brooks

Melody is an eleven-year-old girl who has cerebral palsy, therefore she has little control over her body and cannot speak. Despite this, Melody is very intelligent and she desires to find a way to communicate with the people around her. Unfortunately, due to her inability to communicate in a meaningful way, most people assume Melody is mentally retarded.

Melody attends regular school, but she is placed in the special needs class with other students who are mentally unable to participate in regular classes. Melody finds this class extremely boring and she learns more from the television. All Melody wants is to be a normal girl. Therefore, when she is placed in inclusion classes and receives a computer that helps her speak and participate in class, she feels that she is on her way. Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to give Melody the benefit of the doubt.

Melody discovers that even her teachers believe her to be incapable, such as when she takes a practice test for the Whiz Kids competition and passes with a perfect score. No one can believe she did it without cheating. For this reason, Melody takes the exam to choose the team to compete and she passes that as well, winning a spot on the team. Unfortunately, not everything goes as it should and Melody is excluded from a team breakfast that causes her to miss the only available flight.

Melody is often frustrated from her inability to communicate with others. The experience with her teachers and classmates teaches her that others have disabilities too, such as the inability to see beyond the obvious. Melody does not give up and this proves that she is a girl of strong character, stronger than some around her.

Diane Brooks

Diane Brooks is Melody's mother. Mrs. Brooks is one of the first to fight for Melody and her rights to live as normal a life as possible. However, Mrs. Brooks is also a woman who frustrates easily and she often has trouble understanding Melody or being patient enough to try to understand her. This leads to some moments of unpleasantness for Melody. It also leads to tragedy when Mrs. Brooks fails to understand Melody's warning when two-year-old Penny gets out of the house in a rain storm and behind Mrs. Brooks' moving car. However, Mrs. Brooks loves Melody very much and will do almost anything for her.

Chuck Brooks

Chuck Brooks is Melody's father. Mr. Brooks is a kind and gentle man who treats Melody from the very beginning just like any other child. He talks to her, tells her things,



and reads to her at night. Mr. Brooks is a good father who wants the best for Melody and Penny.

Penny Brooks

Penny is Melody's two-year-old sister. Penny is a perfect child who develops at the appropriate rate for a child her age. This causes Melody some jealousy as she cannot help but notice a baby can do all the things she cannot. However, Melody loves her sister and is heartbroken when she cannot stop her mother from moving the car over Penny. Penny survives the accident.

Violet Valencia/Mrs. V

Mrs. V. is Melody's neighbor. Mrs. V. is a good woman who believes in Melody's strengths and encourages her to grow. Mrs. V. is Melody's strongest supporter and she is not afraid to defend Melody to strangers and anyone else who dares to discriminate against Melody. It is Mrs. V. who helps Melody get and set up her Medi-Talker and Mrs. V. who encourages Melody to test for the Whiz Kids competition.

Catherine

Catherine is a college student who works as Melody's personal aide at school. Catherine is a funny, fashion-disabled young woman who helps Melody through a great deal at school, including open discrimination from a teacher and other students. Catherine, along with Mrs. V. and the Brooks, is Melody's strongest supporter.

Mr. Dimmings

Mr. Dimmings is Melody's history teacher in her inclusion class. Mr. Dimmings is a good teacher, but he is uninformed about children like Melody. When Melody joins his class, Mr. Dimmings has few expectations of her, therefore he is shocked when Melody participates in the practice test for the Whiz Kids competition. Mr. Dimmings is even more shocked when Melody passes the test with a perfect score and later takes the official test for the competition and makes the team. Mr. Dimmings says some hurtful things about Melody at the beginning of the Whiz Kids episode, but appears to become more understanding as things progress. However, Mr. Dimmings is also part of the group that purposely leaves Melody behind in the trip to Washington, D.C.

Claire

Claire is one of the girls in Melody's classes. Claire is an unkind girl who openly makes fun of the kids in the special education classes. When Melody joins the history class, Claire openly objects to Melody's participation in the class, including Melody's place on



the Whiz Kids competition team. However, when the press come to interview her, Claire is quite happy to claim on camera that she is Melody's best friend.

Rose

Rose is a young girl in the fifth grade who befriends Melody when Melody begins joining the normal classes. Rose is kind and she stands up for Melody quite often. However, after Melody's team wins the Whiz Kid qualifying match, Rose becomes annoyed with Melody because all the press coverage is about Melody's disability rather than the rest of the team. Rose is also among those who purposely leave Melody behind the day they travel to Washington D.C. for the competition.

Conner

Conner is a popular boy in Melody's school. Conner is unruly and not always kind, but he often comes to Melody's defense in class. Conner is the one who offers Melody the ninth place trophy the team won in Washington, D.C.



Objects/Places

Hats

Penny loves hats and she wears a different one every day.

Clothing

Melody is often embarrassed by her clothing because meals tend to be a messy affair because of her erratic movements and also because her mother often dresses her in easy to get on and off sweats. Melody would prefer to wear jeans like all the other kids at school.

Communications Tray

Melody has a communications tray that her parents and Mrs. V. have glued words to to help Melody communicate. The tray is limiting and Melody finds it frustrating.

Books on Tape

Although Melody can read, she prefers to listen to books on tape because she has trouble focusing her eyes on small print.

Wheelchair

Melody uses an electric wheelchair to get around most of the time, but also has a manual wheelchair she can use.

Laptop

Rose comes to school with a laptop and it gives Melody the idea to find something similar that she can use with her thumbs to help her communicate.

Medi-Talker

Melody gets a computer that is specially designed to help those who cannot speak due to medical reasons to have a voice. She uses this to clearly communicate for the first time in her life.



Whiz Kids Competition

The Whiz Kids Competition is a competition for fifth and sixth grade students that cumulates into a competition in Washington, D.C. Melody tests and receives a place on the team for her school, but is excluded from the final competition where he team goes on and wins ninth place.

Aquairum

Mrs. V. takes Melody, her family, and Rose to the local aquarium after she wins six free tickets.

Washington, D.C.

The Whiz Kids competition takes place in Washington, D.C., but Melody misses her chance to go when her flight is canceled due to bad weather.



Themes

Defining Disability

This novel has a disabled young girl as the main character. However, the reader will note that the author rarely uses the word disabled to describe her main character. Although Melody must deal with the difficulties of not being able to communicate in a normal way and having a body that often does not want to work as she would like, she does not consider herself abnormal.

Melody is a special young woman who is highly intelligent and has a mind bursting with information. The fact that Melody cannot share this information does not make her retarded, as one doctor diagnosed her. The truth is, Melody is just like any other eleven year old child except that she is unusually aware and intelligent.

As Melody begins to interact with the other students at her school, she comes to the conclusion that all people are disabled in their own way. Mr. Dimmings cannot see an intelligent girl locked in a broken body. Claire has imperfect teeth and a lack of empathy for other people. No one is perfect and Melody recognizes this as she interacts with these people and finds herself fighting against their misconceptions of her. It is a difficult situation that only makes Melody stronger and more determined not to be labeled.

Defining Normal

Normal is a relative term. Melody tries not to use it when she discusses the other kids at school because she does not think of herself as abnormal. As the novel progresses, the reader and Melody both become aware of the people who make assumptions about Melody based on her appearance. It is a frustrating situation, but Melody has good people who support her and have her back in these situations.

When Melody becomes a member of the Whiz Kids competition team from her school, the press makes a big deal about her ability to participate. It is embarrassing for Melody, but more, it makes her stand out. This bothers Melody because she knows the others on the team will not like it. It turns out she is right and the others eventually prove it by allowing her to be left behind when it is time to go to the national competition in Washington, D.C.

When everything is said and done, Melody takes stock of herself. Melody realizes she is a normal kid, just like everyone in her class. She likes the same things, she worries about the same things, and she hopes for the same things. The only difference is that her body is broken, preventing her from communicating these things. It does not stop her from being normal, as little disabilities do not stop her classmates.



Family

Melody's parents treat her just like any other child from the moment they bring her home from the hospital. Melody can look back at videos made when she was an infant and see the worry in her mother's eyes, but she cannot remember her mother ever treating her any differently from another infant. Her father never treated her any differently. In fact, he talked to her like an adult and he read to her, doing all the things a father would normally do with his new child.

Melody has been doubted and treated badly by a great many people, from doctors to teachers to kids her own age. Each time her parents have been there to back her up, to continue to insist that she be treated normally. Melody is a normal child in every aspect except for her broken body. She even learned how to read, thanks to her beloved neighbor, Mrs. V.

Melody has a strong support system and it is this system that has allowed her to become such a strong and capable young girl. If not for this great family, there is no telling where Melody might be and if she ever would have found a way to communicate. Therefore, family is a strong theme in this novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view. The narrating character is Melody Brooks, a young girl who has cerebral palsy and therefore cannot communicate in conventional ways. Melody tells her story through thoughts in her head, expressing herself quite naturally in a way that is unusual from the way in which she communicates in the real world.

The point of view of this novel is unique not because it is the first-person point of view, but because it is in the voice of someone who cannot speak or communicate in a conventional manner. This novel is told mostly in narration due to Melody's inability to speak, with many conversations taking place inside her head rather than in real time. It is this unique point of view that allows the reader to get to know the real Melody and care about her in a way few others have had the chance to do.

Setting

The novel is set in a city in Ohio. The novel is set in modern times, in a suburban setting that lends itself well to the suburban family that populates the pages. The setting takes into account modern conveniences, such as electric wheelchairs and laptop computers, that allow the main character to be independent and learn to communicate with others.

The setting of this novel is not as important in place as it is in time. The main character is a young woman with cerebral palsy who cannot communicate in a conventional manner. For this reason, she must find unconventional ways to communicate. By setting the novel in modern times, the author is able to provide for her main character a computer that speaks for her. In this way, the setting of the novel works well with the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. The novel is written for a young audience, therefore most of the language is simple. The language reflects well the main character, an eleven year old girl who has a very high intelligence. The language does not contain any foreign words or phrases, nor does it include slang that the intended audience might not understand.

The language of this novel is appropriate to the main character and the intended audience. The language is straightforward and does not include any language that the intended audience might not comprehend, making it simple for the reader to comprehend and not distract from the plot. Hence, the language is appropriate to the plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into thirty-three chapters. The chapters are relatively short. The story is told in a linear fashion although there is a great deal of flashback in the first few chapters as the main character introduces herself and her circumstances to the reader. The novel is recounted primarily in narration with a great deal of inner monologue as the main character is initially unable to communicate in conventional ways.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Melody Brooks as she finds a way to communicate with the world and struggles to find her place in school. A subplot follows Melody's relationships with her family, Mrs. V., and Rose. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Words. I'm surrounded by thousands of words" (Chapter 1, p. 9).

"I guess I figured out I was different a little at a time" (Chapter 2, p. 15).

"When I sleep, I dream. And in my dreams I can do anything" (Chapter 7, p. 41).

"I think I knew Mom was going to have a baby even before she did. She smelled different, like new soap. Her skin felt softer and warmer" (Chapter 9, p. 53).

"Wouldn't it be cool if somebody could invent a bubble-talking machine before fifth grade starts in a couple of weeks" (Chapter 10, p. 63).

"I close my eyes, trying not to cry, dreaming of the perfect Melody-made computer" (Chapter 14, p. 84).

"When I think about it, I realize I have never, ever said any words directly to my parents. So I push a couple of buttons, and the machine speaks the words I've never been able to say. 'I love you'" (Chapter 15, p. 93).

"If Melody Brooks can win the first round, then my questions must not be difficult enough" (Chapter 17, p. 103).

"I still couldn't get over the fact I was part of the team. Okay. Truth. There was the team, and there was me, and we were in the same room. But we weren't quite a team" (Chapter 22, p. 126).

"Our team hasn't done anything special. They don't need to. They have me" (Chapter 23, p. 133).

"What happened today was all my fault. I should have listened. We should have all stayed home and spent the day together. But we didn't. Because of me" (Chapter 30, p. 167).

"This is going to take a while. So much is stuffed inside my mind. I have lots to say and just one thumb to say it with" (Chapter 33, p. 183).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Melody? What causes her to be unable to speak? Why is this a problem? How does Melody communicate with her family? Her friends? Why is this way of communicating not satisfying to Melody? What would she rather have to help her communicate? How does Melody think a proper form of communication would help her get along in the outside world?

Who is Rose? Why does Rose befriend Melody? In what form does their friendship take? Why is Rose unhappy when Melody decides to try for the Whiz Kid competition team? Why is Rose unhappy with the fact that Melody's picture is the only one in the papers after the competition? Is Rose one of those who purposely left Melody behind when the team traveled to Washington, D.C.? Why?

Who is Catherine? What is her job? How does she get along with Melody? What things does Catherine do for Melody? How do they communicate with one another? Does Melody like Catherine? How does Catherine help Melody get her Medi-Talker? For what reason? How else does Catherine help Melody adjust to her new classes and the other students?

Who is Mrs. Brooks? How does she feel about people making assumptions about Melody? Why does she become angry when a doctor tells her that Melody is profoundly retarded? What does this mean? What does the doctor tell Mrs. Brooks she should do with Melody? Why would he say this? How does Mrs. Brooks respond? What does this say about Melody's mother and their relationship?

Who is Mrs. V.? Why does she take such an interest in Melody? How does she help Melody learn to roll over and crawl? For what reason? Why does she teach Melody how to fall from her wheelchair? What else does Mrs. V. teach Melody? For what reasons? How does that work out for Melody? Why does Mrs. V. encourage Melody to participate in the Whiz Kid competition? What is the ultimate conclusion of that episode?

Why does Penny like to escape her family? Where does she go? For what reason? What does Melody do when she sees Penny sneak out of the house? Why does Mrs. Brooks not understand Melody's outburst? How might things have gone differently if Mrs. Brooks had paid more attention? Why does Melody blame herself for Penny's accident? Whose fault is it? How might it have been prevented?

What is cerebral palsy? What causes it? How does it affect the patient? How does Melody deal with her cerebral palsy? What are some of the side effects? How does Melody feel about these things? Why can Melody not speak? Why do some believe her to be retarded due to her lack of ability to communicate? Is she?