

Paper Towns Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Paper Towns is the story of a boy named Quentin Jacobsen and the adventure he is drawn into by his childhood friend and secret love Margo Roth Spiegelman. As children, Quentin and Margo discovered a dead man's body; an event that binds them in ways they do not realize. As they grow up however, they grow apart. After this is explained in the prologue, Part I of the book sets up the main narrative by introducing the setting, Jefferson High in Orlando, Florida in the early 2000s and introduces Quentin's good friends, Radar and Ben Starling, his fellow nerds. In contrast, Margo is the most popular girl in school who has an incredible reputation for her wild hijinks. The plot takes off in Chapter 3 when Margo sneaks into Quentin's bedroom and asks him to help her execute an eleven-part plan, which largely involves taking revenge on her ex-boyfriend. Throughout the night, Quentin is exhilarated and his love for Margo is reenergized.

In Part II of the book, Margo completely disappears and Quentin wonders if he will see her again. However, Margo has left him a series of clues as to her whereabouts. Part II is spent piecing together Margo's clues. Quentin pursues Margo with the help of his friends, but all the while, high school comes to an end. Quentin follows a string of false leads, which makes him increasingly reflective and leads him to gradually accept that he has made Margo into a magical non-person, a "paper girl" and that he loves someone who may not exist. He eventually decides that the only way to find Margo is to understand who she is. Throughout Part II, Quentin grapples with Margo's use of the phrase "paper towns" in her clues. Eventually he figures out that a paper town is a false city on a map that cartographers once used to detect copycats. Margo had left for the paper town of Algae, New York.

Part III begins the night of graduation when Quentin grabs his friends to leave on an intense, twenty-one hour road trip from Orlando to upstate Algae. Quentin, Radar, Ben, and Ben's new girlfriend Lacey, must catch Margo the day before she leaves Algae forever. When they reach Algae, they find Margo in an old barn, writing. After fighting furiously about Margo's apparent selfishness for leaving, Ben, Radar, and Lacey storm out. Quentin and Margo learn that they had idealized one another and love each other. However, they both realize with regret that their love was based in falsehood, in being a "paper boy" and a "paper girl." Margo left in order to release everyone from the effects of her false, public personality. Quentin, however, does not give up on Margo. They admit their romantic affections for one another but realize that their values must inevitably lead them to separate futures.



Prologue, Part One: The Strings, Chapters 1-2

Prologue, Part One: The Strings, Chapters 1-2 Summary

The prologue notes that everyone gets to experience one miracle in their lives. The author's (Q or Quentin) miracle is knowing Margo Roth Spiegelman. They were both born in Jefferson Park in Orlando, Florida. They had known one another since they were two years old and they played together until they were nine. Margo had always been gorgeous and Q had always had a crush on her. One of his last memories with Margo occurred when the two of them found a dead man in a park. Q wanted to report the man to his parents and then the police. He surmises this is because he was "well-adjusted" due to the fact that both of his parents were therapists. But Margo wanted to investigate. Margo later learned that the man's name was Robert Joyner, that he was a lawyer, thirty-six and somewhat mentally disturbed. Apparently his divorce had pushed him to commit suicide. Q notes that Margo loved mysteries, so much that she turned herself into one.

In Part One, The Strings or Q is a senior in high school. He is talking to his mother about how he doesn't want to go to prom. He considers whether anyone would even go with him. Q then introduces the reader to his two best friends, Ben Starling and "Radar" (named Marcus). Ben Starling years ago he had had a kidney infection which caused him to urinate blood. He received the nickname "bloody Ben" because a girl had said that the blood in his urine was caused by excessive masturbation. This rumor prevented him from getting dates. Radar (a black boy who in fact looked nothing like Radar O'Reilly, the M*A*S*H* character after whom he was named) had a quasi-girlfriend named Angela he could go with. It is of some amusement to Q that Radar has not had Angela over to his house (she wants to go) because his parents have the world's largest collection of black Santas (dolls, yard ornaments, Pez dispensers) and it embarrasses him.

Q and his friends are considered nerds in Jefferson High's social hierarchy, though they are largely left alone. Nonetheless, Q still pays attention to Margo, but doesn't let on. Margo has a boyfriend named Jase and has created a fabulous reputation due to her epic adventures, such as meeting big music celebrities, briefly joining the circus, etc.

The day described in Chapter 1 is ordinary until near midnight, when Margo climbs over from her room next door to Q's house into his room. Margo wants Q to help her run a number of errands with his parents' car. Her car keys have been taken from her due to her parents' desire to keep her from embarrassing them. She needs to do eleven things and cannot get any of her "underlings" to do her bidding. Eventually Margo's father hears her and makes her return to her house but she is able to sneak out anyway. Quentin eventually agrees to take her to Publix and then Walmart. Margo needs to buy



some items and has hundreds of dollars saved from her Bat Mitzvah. She tells Q that he is going to have the best night of his life.

Prologue, Part One: The Strings, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The prologue and first two chapters set up the book as expected, but they have a somewhat unique format. The book begins with a prologue, which introduces the two main characters, the author, named Quentin ("Q" for short) and the girl that he is continually fascinated and partly in love with, Margo Roth Spiegelman, who Q grew up with. The prologue tells the story of how they met (they were two) and one of the last times they ever played together (when they were nine and found a dead man's body who had killed himself due to depression). In Part One: Strings, the story unfolds. The setting is, at first, Jefferson High School in Orlando, Florida. Q and Margo are both seniors. We meet Q's friends, Ben and Radar and their mild anxiety over how to handle senior prom. It's clear that while Margo and Q have always remained friendly their lives have proceeded on separate tracks. She has become famous in high school for her epic adventures and is dating a man named Jase. Q has maintained a relatively healthy suburban life with his two parents, who are therapists and his good, nerdy friends. This is all fine until Margo decides to pop into Q's room near midnight and practically demand that he drive her around on a number of missions that she claims will comprise the best night of his life.



Part One, Chapters 3-6

Part One, Chapters 3-6 Summary

Chapters 3 through 6 take us from Parts 1 through 9 of Margo's "plan." During their initial drive, Q lets Margo talk most of the time as he is in love with and finds her totally original and unlike anyone else that he knows. At Publix, Margo sends Q to buy a weird list of supplies. She wonders why Q is so anxious and why he cares so much about ordinary matters in life. At Wal-Mart, Margo picks up "The Club," a car lock. She expresses concern that everyone lives in the future and not the present.

In Chapter 4, they banter a bit. Margo asks Q about his girlfriend, though they had been separated for months. Margo just found out that her boyfriend, Jase, has been cheating on her for six weeks with Becca Arrington who many found extremely attractive, though Q finds it ridiculous that anyone would find her more attractive than Margo. Margo is taking Quentin to Jase's house. When they arrive, Margo locks Jase's Lexus with the Club and takes the key with her. This is Part I of her plan. In Part II, they arrive at Becca's palatial home. Margo has Q dial Mr. Arrington and tell him that his daughter is having sex with Jase downstairs. When he runs Jase out of the house, half-naked, Margo has Q take a picture of him. The picture captures his penis swinging about in the wind. Margo remarks that it is extremely small despite its illustrious history. The photo is Part III. In Part IV, they sneak into Becca's house to steal Jase's clothes. In Part V, Margo leaves a catfish Q in Becca's closet and leaves a message that their friendship is over, that it "sleeps with the fishes." She then spray paints an M on Becca's wall. They escape as Becca's father cocks his shotgun. Margo is upset because she hoped that Jase wasn't cheating. They next arrive at a seven-eleven where Margo paints her nails while Q catches his breath.

In Part VI, which begins in Chapter 5, they take tulips to Karin's house. Karin is the girl who told Margo about Jase. Margo had "shot the messenger" and she wanted to apologize with a note. In Part VII, they go to Jase's house where Margo throws a fish through his window. Margo says she "brings the rain" down on those who cross her, and that Q is helping her do so. In Part VIII Margo takes Q to her best friend Lacey's house. Lacey hadn't told her about Jase, which made her a terrible friend. Margo explains how Lacey would belittle her appearance and fishes for compliments from Q, who is happy to give them to her. When they arrive at Lacey's, Margo jimmy opens the door to Lacey's car and leaves a fish inside and a note that their friendship "sleeps with the fishes." She then spray paints an M on the top of her car.

In Part IX, they drive to downtown Orlando and enter the Suntrust Building, a skyscraper that is guarded by a boy that Margo knew named Gus. He was a senior when they were freshmen. Gus lets them go to the twenty-fifty floor. From there they can see all the places they had visited. Q remarks on the beautiful of the view but Margo thinks it all looks fake, like a "paper town" and that she hates herself for caring about the people who hurt her. She says that it is one "string" that broke inside of her. Q



tries to flirt with her a bit, but she shoots him down, telling him that he's only cute when he's confident. Q briefly hopes that something will happen between them but there was no chance of this.

Part One, Chapters 3-6 Analysis

Chapters 3 through 6 launch Margo's plan into action and reveals much about her relationship with Q and both of their personalities. In short, Margo is a woman scorned. Her boyfriend, Jase Worthington, has been cheating on her for weeks with a girl named Becca Arrington. Her friends did not tell her and Margo is out for revenge with Q's help. Margo has an eleven-step plan to take out her frustration on all of those involved and the hijinks that she and Q engage in to do so are witty and hilarious. The reader will get a real kick out of Margo's creativity even if she seems a bit merciless. Margo continues to seem enigmatic to Q and he is madly in love with her. He does everything he can to keep her talking to him and to keep her interested and even sometimes allows himself to hope that he is growing close to her. However, while Margo seems to respect and admire Q she has little interest in him other than as her partner in crime.

Repeatedly in the text Margo and Q's characters are contrasted. Q is careful, although anxious and level-headed. He has never engaged in such activities. He is drawn to Margo but is also content to live a normal, measured life. Margo, in contrast, hates everything normal about herself and sees inauthenticity all around her. She seems to be a person fully alienated and critical of her society and her social group. We also see how she somewhat toys with Q, fishing for compliments and being kind to him despite seeming to recognize his attraction to her.



Part One, Chapters 7-9

Part One, Chapters 7-9 Summary

Part Ten of Chapter 7 reveals Margo's gift to Q. She will exact a pre-chosen punishment on anyone who Q thinks deserves it. Q notes that he has no real enemies, though Chuck Parson, a jock who humiliated him on several occasions, could really use some comeuppance. Margo claims to remember where Chuck's house is, but they break into the wrong house. After they regroup, Q calls Ben who uses the school computer network to find Chuck's address. A few blocks down they climb in Chuck's window use hair removal to take off one of his eyebrows. Chuck wakes up screaming but by this time Margo and Q have escaped and Margo has spray-painted her trademark M on his house.

In Chapter 8, they pursue Part XI, breaking into SeaWorld. On the way, Margo remarks about everything that she did for him that night and Q is outraged, claiming that they spent the night taking out Margo's anger on other people. But Margo insists that she didn't need Q but rather picked him. Margo claims that her experience with Jase caused one of her "strings" to break. This worries Q but Margo assures him that she is too vain to kill herself, as Robert Joyner had done. They then turn to break into SeaWorld by crossing a six-lane highway, swimming a nasty moat and climbing a few fences. In the moat, Margo is bit by a snake and Q quickly tries to suck out the venom, though the snake turned out to be harmless. When they get into SeaWorld they can't see any animals, as they are all in other tanks. Q is exhilarated though Margo seems a bit disappointed. They are then, as expected, caught by a guard who Margo has to bribe to let them go. As Margo and Q leave, Q asks her to dance the fox-trot with him as they had in sixth grade and she obliges. On the way home, Q feels romantically attached to Margo but is afraid to say anything.

In Chapter 9, Margo and Q wipe themselves off with dish towels and express pride at their success. As a small gift, Margo gives Q the photo of a half-naked Jase, to do with as he likes. As he drops Margo off, she hugs him and tells him that she will miss hanging out with him. When Q tells her that they could easily be friends at school (and, he hopes, romantically involved as she is newly single), she tells him that would be "quite impossible." Margo then climbs into her window and Q goes home.

Part One, Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Chapters 7-9 take the reader through Parts 10 and 11 of Margo's plan and their execution. Margo offers Q the attempt to rain down on anyone that he hates and he picks bully and jock Chuck Parson. After that Margo takes Q to break into SeaWorld, the only major amusement park that she has not broken into. Q loves it, though Margo is somewhat disappointed. These last chapters continue the major themes of Margo as a



mystery and object of Q's love, of their long-time connection and ongoing reconnection. It brings to a close their long-night experience of getting Margo's revenge.

It is here that Part I ends. What follows will be of interest to readers because it will show how the choices they made that night affect them throughout the rest of the book. We also learn that Q has refocused and developed his feelings for Margo but that she may well rebuff him. In fact, to some extent she already has. She clearly still feels something for Jase and has not been clear on why she "chose" Q to run her "errands" with. Clearly the point of the book is to resolve the increasing tension of Q's feelings for Margo but at this point, all bets are off. The remainder of the book must play out this key plot tension.



Part Two: The Grass, Chapter 1-3

Part Two: The Grass, Chapter 1-3 Summary

Q wakes up extremely tired after getting only thirty minutes of sleep. There is no sign of Margo in her room. When Q gets to school, he tells Ben what happened to Chuck. While Q is in class, he makes a note of his favorite moments with Margo. At lunch, Ben and Q go to Ben's car "RHAPAW" or Ben's Buick "Rode Hard and Put Away Wet." Q tells Ben everything. Margo's car is nowhere to be found. Q wonders whether she has departed on another adventure.

Chapter 2 opens with Q describing the social hierarchy as a divine rights monarchy ruled by Margo. Things get chaotic without her restraining crazy behavior by some of the more popular guys. Chuck and his friends destroy twelve bikes belonging to freshmen and sophomores and Jasper Hanson sprays some kids with a water gun filled with urine. Q, inspired by Margo, plans a counteroffensive. That evening Q sends Jase an email threatening to share the picture with everyone unless he clamps down on his friends and compensates the kids for their destroyed bikes. Initially Jase refuses but when Q does not back down, Jase complies.

In Chapter 3, Margo has been gone for 48 hours. When Q goes downstairs, his parents, Margo's parents, and a black police detective named Otis Warren are sitting at the kitchen table. They ask him where Margo is, but he does not know. This is the fourth time that Margo has run away and her parents are sick of her. They're "done" and plan to change the locks so that she can't get back in. Margo always leaves clues as to where she goes but the clues lead nowhere. Margo's parents describe her as a sickness, despite the fact that Q's therapist parents attempts to mollify them. Eventually the four parents ask Otis and Q to leave the room. Otis and Q begin a conversation. Eventually Q feels comfortable enough to tell Otis everything that happened. Otis explains that there are many girls like Margo whose parents cause them to run away. These girls whose "strings are cut" don't live magnificent lives. They just float away and spend almost thirty years working in a diner or come home begging for money. Otis is particularly sad for Q as he seems to care for Margo. He then assures Q that she will probably come home soon.

Ben has stayed the night and comes downstairs, inviting Q upstairs with Radar to play their favorite computer game, Resurrection. While playing, Quentin talks to them about Margo. They notice later that when Margo's parents pull down her window shade, Margo had tacked a poster onto the back of it that depicts Woody Guthrie with a caption that read, "This machine kills fascists." They decide that Margo has left Q a clue.



Part Two: The Grass, Chapter 1-3 Analysis

Part begins in the aftermath of Part I. Q wakes up thirty minutes afterwards and notices that Margo isn't home. This discovery is confirmed by Margo's total absence for the next two days. Q explains how his friends react and how the school's social hierarchy somewhat fell apart as Margo had provided a natural check on the excesses of some of the school's elite males, like Chuck and Jase. Q organizes a counteroffensive by blackmailing Jase with the photo of his penis to stop his friends from being hard on a number of different school kids and is successful. We see Q's character starting to evolve and develop as a result of the "gift" Margo gave him.

The third chapter, however, develops matters a bit further. Margo is still gone and her parents report her absence to a detective. This is the fourth time Margo has run away. The reader learns that Margo's parents don't really like her very much and are tired of her running away. They blame her entirely, referring to her as a sickness in the family. Q's therapist parents provide transparent psychological analysis of their family dynamic, which is probably meant by the author to communicate a message to the reader. But we start to see that Margo is not a random self-authored mystery but is somewhat complicated by her family environment. The detective also helps Q to see Margo in a less magical way, as he comments that lots of girls her age have their strings cut and rarely do much with their lives. Q seems resistant to seeing Margo in a different light.



Part Two, Chapter 4-8

Part Two, Chapter 4-8 Summary

Radar, Ben, and Q wait for Margo's parents and the detective to leave. They go to Margo's house and speak to Ruthie, Margo's little sister, to see if she had any clues. Ruthie lets them search Margo's room, which is stuffed with vinyl records that Q never knew about. They thumb through the records looking for clues until they find a note from Margo saying, "Walt Whitman's Niece." So Q picks up Margo's copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and thumbs through it. He thinks about how impressed Margo will be when she sees his confidence. He hopes that she chose him to find her. He then finds Whitman quotes that Margo had outlined which he takes to mean that he should look for her.

When Q returns to school, he is stunned to find Lacey Pemberton, the beautiful ex-friend of Margo's, walking up to him. Q is hanging out with his friends. She says that she heard Q was with Margo and Ben admits that he was. Lacey asks why Margo was "pissed at her" and Q explains that Margo thought Lacey knew about Jase. Lacey however explains that she didn't know. In fact, she is so mad at her boyfriend Craig for not telling her that she had broken up with him. Her best friend was gone and probably, Lacey suggested, in New York City. Through Lacey's revelations, Q starts to believe that Margo has given him tools to grow. Due to his interactions with Margo, Lacey, and Jase, Q begins to feel home at school for the first time. In the meanwhile, Ben is ecstatic that Lacey has agreed to go to prom with him. Q has no date, but he is focused on Margo. While they're driving, Ben suggests that the instruction from the Whitman verse about unscrewing a door from its hinges was not metaphorical but literal. So instead, they plan to unscrew Margo's door.

In Chapter 6, the boys unscrew Margo's door and find nothing. They wonder if Q should go to NYC and whether Lacey dropped the clue because she was Margo's mole. When Q goes home, his mother told him a story about coping mechanisms and Q wonders whether his routines weren't his coping mechanism for dealing with Margo's absence. The idea of going to NYC eats away at him.

In Chapter 7, Margo has been gone for six days. Q asks his parents what he should do. His mother and father say that Margo's well-being is not his responsibility and that he should focus on graduating. All that Ben can talk about is Lacey so he isn't much help. Q focuses on Margo, secretly fantasizing about them going to prom together. He then realizes that Margo was referring to his door hinges and not hers. So he unscrews his door and finds an address to 8328 Barlesville Ave, which is almost 35 miles away. Radar, Ben, and Q all play sick the next day. In Chapter 8, they drive together, exhilarated by skipping school and searching for Margo. They reach an old abandoned building which scares them a bit. It reeks of rotting flesh and all of a sudden Q becomes terrified that Margo is dead and that he is supposed to find her body. He is surprised by



the thought and becomes more desperate to find her, as he worries that he does not know her.

Part Two, Chapter 4-8 Analysis

Chapters 4 through 8 gradually build the plot's core tension - locating Margo in the hopes of Q finding love. Margo is still gone and now Radar and Ben are helping Q track down Margo's cryptic clues. They go through her things in her room only to find a record and a book with mere shreds of evidence. Q spends days thinking them through and going through various theories in his head and with his friends. In the meanwhile, they speak with Lacey Pemberton, who actually comes to them to talk to them about Margo. It is clear that Q's connection to Margo is changing him from the inside out. His social circumstances are molding themselves to him. Chuck apologized to him and Lacey is talking to him and, surprisingly, she agrees to go to prom with Ben. He claims to feel at home in high school, to feel far less alienated than before. Q's search is emboldening him gradually.

The most interesting twist in these chapters occurs towards the end of Chapter 8, when Q's excitement at finding Margo in the Orlando countryside is replaced by terror that she has actually killed herself and that Margo wants him to find her body. Q remarks to the reader that he is still drawn to finding her but he is now uncertain about who Margo really is. He still seems drawn to finding her but his reasons are, all of a sudden, bigger than Margo, who may not be the prize that he wants.



Part Two, Chapters 9-11

Part Two, Chapters 9-11 Summary

In Chapter 9, the boys find that the stench is coming from a raccoon, which relieves Q. After breaking into one of the abandoned buildings (at what appears to be an abandoned minimal), they find the spray painted words "Troll Hole" which led into a souvenir store untouched since 1986. However, when they break into an office room they see the words written in bright spray paint, "You will go to the paper towns and you will never come back." The boys leave the minimal frightened and concerned.

Q remains obsessed with the clues. He calls Otis Warren, the detective, who assures him that she's a legal adult and that Q should let her come home before he "floats away" as well. Instead, Q tries to hunt down the meaning of a paper town. He concludes that a paper town refers to an abandoned subdivision project, a "pseudovision." Perhaps Margo is waiting for him in a shadow version of the subdivision they lived in as children where they found the dead body of Robert Joyner and Margo's first strings broke. Ben and Radar are increasingly focused on prom and Ben tells Q that Margo's just a drama queen and to let it go, at least for now. Q presses on, borrowing RHAPAW and searching local pseudovisions to no avail. At Holly Meadows, he falls to his knees in front of a tree that looks much like the tree where they had found Robert Joyner and finally cried for Margo, pounding the ground, and mourning her death.

While Ben, Radar, and Lacey support Q's continuing search, they are also focused on prom. The next day Q is so desperate to find Margo that he decides to talk to Dr. Holden, his English teacher, about Margo's message in Walt Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself." Dr. Holden tells Q that the Whitman poem is an odd suicide note as it is optimistic, holding that life is sacred and valuable. She claims that Q might learn more if he reads the entire poem. Q tries but finds the poem repetitive. After school he continues his search but finds nothing and gives up on the poem as he falls asleep. In the morning, the day of senior prom, Ben and Radar are focused on the events of the day. Q wonders whether Margo didn't deserve to be forgotten but renews his commitment to finding her. So he lies to his parents, saying that he is going to prom stag, takes the car and goes to Quail Hollow, another pseudovision. He does not find her and returns to the mini-mall.

Part Two, Chapters 9-11 Analysis

Chapters 9 through 11 resolve a mini-plot and start over the process of rebuilding tension towards a more significant plot element yet to be resolved. The boys do not find Margo's dead body. In fact, none of Q's many searches turn up Margo's dead body. Q is convinced that she is dead and that the Whitman poem she outlined is her suicide note. He pursues a number of different avenues, talking to his friends, the detective and even his high school English teacher. They all tell Q in various ways that he has assumed the



worst, he's too worried and that he should calm down. Dr. Holden is especially convincing as she tells Q that he is probably misreading the poem and that he should sit down and read it all the way through. But Q is convinced he is the last person on earth who cares about her and that he is meant to find her, dead or alive (probably dead). He is having trouble cracking the final clues. That is all.

We see a number of threads developed in these chapters. The strings metaphor is increasingly pressed. Much talk is made of Margo's strings breaking and Q following up on them. Further, the prom plot device is significant. Chapter 11 ends on prom day. Ben and Radar are focused on having a good prom and making good memories with their women, Lacey and Angela. Everyone else is enjoying their lives but Q is drawn in by his love for Margo and his sense that she has chosen him for something special. It is also significant that Q expressly notices that he hoped that his experience with Margo had changed him for the better but that he feared it was not so.



Part Two, Chapters 12-13

Part Two, Chapters 12-13 Summary

Over the course of an hour Q discovers a number of small changes in the minimall. First, blue painters tape covered the hole in the particle board Ben had created. One of the calendars had been changed from February to June. Q discovers some of Margo's nail polish and some carpet that smelled like her lilac shampoo. He knew she had been there after they parted ways. So Q decided to wait for her. It occurs to him that it would be very "unMargo" for her to stay there, as boring as it was. But Q realizes that it only seemed "unMargo" because he didn't really know her. Perhaps no one did. The quiet of the souvenir store led him to reread "Song of Myself" which drew him to the metaphor of grass that Whitman uses to symbolize a wide range of things, from God to childhood to death. Margo was like the grass, as she seemed so different to each person that knew her. Q goes back to searching the shelves of the store when he happens on a travel guide published in 1998, long after the area was abandoned. After finding more travel books, Q realizes that Margo had likely planned to go on a road trip, though to where it wasn't clear.

In Chapter 13, Q wakes up after falling asleep to a phone call from Ben, who is freaking out with joy. Ben, Lacey, Radar, Angela and lots of other people, like Jase, Becca and Chuck, are at Becca's house after prom. Ben demands, in a silly drunk manner, that Q be his designated driver and Q agrees. When Q arrives, he sees Ben doing a keg stand with Jase and some others holding him up. Everyone is being nice to one another. Chuck even comes up and says he somewhat admires Q for being ballsy enough to remove his eyebrow. It feels fake to Q, everyone getting along just because high school was ending. Despite wanting to leave, Q stays so that Ben could have what was, arguably, the greatest day of his life. Later at the party, Q retreats to the bathroom. Lacey is fully clothed in the tub and asks him to talk to her. He agrees and tells him that she and Becca fought. Becca had destroyed Lacey's reputation by telling everyone she had had an STD. Lacey says that Becca is the "new Margo" and that everything sucks without her. Q continues the conversation until Lacey falls asleep. He then scoops up Ben and Lacey and takes them home.

Part Two, Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Chapter 12 continues to expand on one of the major themes of the book - namely the irony of the fact that Q is drawn to Margo, in love with her, and obsessed with finding her despite not really knowing who she is. This grows clear to him as he reflects on why Margo would have stuck around the abandoned souvenir store. The only way he is going to find Margo, he thinks, is if he figures out who she really is. It also turns out that she has probably gone on a road trip. Q will almost certainly follow on whatever trail he can construct.

But life intrudes on Q's obsession in Chapter 13, as Ben needs a designated driver from prom. In Margo's absence all the major social distinctions between Q, Ben and Radar and popular kids like Chuck, Jase, Becca and Lacey have totally broken down. Ben is having a blast with all of them and impressing them with his keg standing abilities. Q finds a lot of it artificial, as a sort of "now that high school is ending let's show that we love everybody" kind of thing. Q even refers to them as "paper kids" enjoying a kind of paper get together.



Part Two, Chapters 14-17

Part Two, Chapters 14-17 Summary

The morning after prom Q wants to share his new insights with Ben who is very uninterested. Q hangs up, frustrated that he was Ben's designated driver but that Ben won't give him the time of day. Q then calls Radar who helps Q plot the various cities that Margo might go to. All the plausible itineraries start in Orlando and end in Hollywood. It's not much help. After Q expresses frustration about Ben and Margo, Radar explains that he is expecting too much of them. He should have a more realistic view of those he is attached to. Q reluctantly agrees.

On Monday, Q continues to analyze "Song of Myself." He wants to visit the last two pseudovisions but ends up having a long conversation with his parents. True to therapist practice, they explain how humans are bad at being mirrors for one another, helping one another see who they really are. Q realizes that he had not been a good mirror for Margo. He had made up who she was supposed to be. Margo was a person who felt fear and who felt empty. She was not a mystery - just a girl.

Q takes his friends on another trip to the pseudovisions. Lacey is now a regular part of their group. On the way, Ben claims that Margo is probably waiting around Orlando, watching everyone look for her, whereas Lacey still thinks that she is in New York. When they reach the old minimall, three men in masks show up. One of them is Gus, the guard at the SunTrust building Q and Margo visited. Gus and his friends are urban explorers who enter old buildings, take pictures, and leave. When Gus was a senior, Margo, then thirteen, tagged along, but she always liked to stay in the places that they went to. She often seemed depressed and wrote in a black notebook. Q liked listening because it helped him imagine her. After Gus and the others left, Radar, Q, Ben, and Lacey give up. Q plans to privately go to Collier Farms, the last pseudovision, because he wanted to find Margo by himself.

The next day Q searches Collier Farms and a nearby pseudovision called Logan Pines. Ben calls and invites Q to a party at Radar's house. He tells Q to calm down and spend time with his friends a week before they graduate. Q finishes looking around, finds nothing, and goes to the party. They have a good time. Ben and Lacey report that they are now dating and have kissed. The boys agree to graduate naked, covered only by their robes. Q notes the sadness that everything is ending. He leaves the party at midnight and tries to read the Whitman again. The poem is teaching him more about himself than Margo. Margo stood for too much to him and he regrets his inability to correctly imagine her. Out of anger, he removes all the maps and pins from his wall and then remembers a small map in the minimall with plotted points.

Part Two, Chapters 14-17 Analysis

Chapters 14-17 occur after prom and before graduation. Q is still obsessed with Margo but increasingly accepted that Margo is not the grand, mysterious image that he had created of her over the last nine years. Instead, he seems to realize, she is just a girl and that to understand her he has to understand her as a full human being. This insight does not come to him totally willingly. It takes some deep conversations with Radar and with his parents to truly understand that to find Margo he has to find out who she really is. High school progresses and finals approach. Prom is over but graduation is coming. Q's friends are trying to spend quality time together. Radar and Angela are doing well, as are Lacey and Ben, who have decided to start dating. Q continues to participate almost unwillingly in these activities, seeing them partly as fake but partly as valuable. He regrets his obsession but he simply will not give up on it. He does realize to some degree though that the search is no longer just about Margo but about figuring himself out. For example, he realizes that the Whitman poem is telling him more about himself than Margo.



Part Two, Chapters 18-20

Part Two, Chapters 18-20 Summary

Q wakes up on Saturday ready to find Margo's map. He and Radar locate the map but are unable to use it to pinpoint any clear location other than the vague areas around L.A., Chicago and New York City. Radar develops a theory that Margo is going to show up for graduation in the audience, having played a big joke on all of them. Ben suggests that she's still mocking them and keeping herself the center of the universe. Q feels very far away.

In Chapter 19, Q prepares for finals. He is convinced Margo is not in Orlando. After a night of discussing possible travel paths, Ben and Lacey agree. They think that she is traveling but will return after twenty-three days, the number of days she will have been gone on graduation day. Q is not convinced. Reading Whitman, Q is convinced that he has to "become" Margo to find her. At the same time, Q is experiencing the "lastness" of school, doing many things for the last time. He finds it hard to leave school but that once he makes the decision easy. In leaving, Q feels like he finally understands Margo. She is not coming back. She gave up her roots and it felt too good.

On Wednesday and Thursday before graduation, Q studies Margo's maps and travel books. On graduation day, Q's parents give him a minivan. He is ecstatic to have a car, though not to have a minivan. He and his friends prepare for their naked graduation but before Q leaves his house, he follows up on a map on Omnictionary (Radar's Wikipedia equivalent) with a plug-in that Radar created. He finds an entry on copyright infringement protection on maps. Sometimes cartographers created fake towns or "paper towns" that represented nowhere at all. When others picked up the locations, the creators knew their maps were forgeries. Algoe, New York was one such paper town. But when Q looks up Algoe, he finds an edit on the entry that says that the population of Algoe will be one until May 29th, at noon. The capitalization is haphazard, which signals Margo. Q has twenty-four hours to travel up the Eastern seaboard. He tells his friends over the phone and they all decide to ditch graduation to catch her.

Part Two, Chapters 18-20 Analysis

The last three chapters wrap up Part Two. It is the end of Q's searching for Margo. By the end he has a solid, specific lead on Margo's location. She is to be found in a "paper town," or a fake town created by cartographers in order to uncover copycat mapmakers. Two mapmakers made up a "paper town" known as Algoe, New York. When Q finds out about the town, he finds Margo's edit telling anyone who reads it that the population of Algoe will be one until May 29th. This is the day after graduation, so Q has not even an entire day to track her down. All of the ordinary qualities of high school fades away. Q must say goodbye and he has and in doing so he understands what a pleasure it is to run away and choose a new path in life. In that way, he believes, he understands

Margo. He has now come to understand who she really is and he now feels that he can find her.



Part Three, The Vessel, Hours 1-12

Part Three, The Vessel, Hours 1-12 Summary

Part III is divided primarily into hours and this section covers the first twelve. In hour one, Ben, Q, Radar and Lacey explain to their parents why they are going to miss graduation. Their parents are upset but they are excited about the road trip. Quickly they fall into their roles. Lacey is the provisions provider and Radar is the researched and calculator. He says they must drive at seventy-two miles per hour and stop only briefly. Q is the nervous driver and Ben, well, has to pee. It looks like they are going to have a great time. In hour two, Q notes that he doesn't get pulled over by a cop despite speeding. They're mostly focused on the road. Ben still has to pee in hour three and has to pee in an empty beer bottle. In hour four, the four of them make their super-quick BP gas station stop in Georgia. Q notes that they all feel exhilarated and young. In hour five they discover that Ben and Q forgot a few important food items and bought giant confederate flag t-shirts for Ben and Radar to wear (they are still naked under their gowns). Q grows contemplative in hour six as he is stuck in the South Carolina traffic. He realizes that Whitman was too optimistic about humans' ability to connect to one another. They cannot actually imaginatively enter the mind of others and become them.

In hour seven, they return to regular speed and are actually able to go seventy-seven miles per hour. Ben takes NyQuil to sleep before he has to drive (they are driving in shifts). Q brings the minivan to a small house with each person occupying a room. In hour eight, Q realizes once more that his experience is teaching him a lot about himself if less about Margo. Hour nine Q and Radar hopped up on sugar in a way that is making them uncomfortable. Hour ten brings their second stop and in hour eleven they are slowed down by a one-land construction section of the interstate. They also have to make an additional bathroom stop for Lacey, who had been driving.

Hour twelve is of significance. Q is driving at 2:40 am in the morning and Ben is in the passenger seat. They are talking about Margo. Ben remarks that dating Lacey has taught him that the person he fell for is not the person he is dating and that he has had to readjust his understanding of who Lacey is. He suggests that Q might be looking at Margo in the same way and that he might be really disappointed when he finds her. Q was furious for a moment before he spots two massive cows in the highway quickly coming up on them. Q decides that they cannot be avoided and notes the terror that overcame him. In that moment he became furious with Margo for drawing them into this "fatal chase" and making them risk their lives. Q throws up his hands as if to accept their fate but Ben quickly pulls the wheel and drives them onto a shoulder of the road against a fence. Everyone is ok, though Q's cheek is bleeding. Ben screams at the blood but Lacey takes care of it. They then realize that the beers are leaking. Q graciously thanks Ben for saving their lives. Miraculously they only lost five minutes of time and the car was almost completely unharmed. Q however is finished driving. They have only 542 miles left.



Part Three, The Vessel, Hours 1-12 Analysis

Part Three, the final part of the book, has begun. It will consist of a hectic and somewhat reckless but incredibly fun drive from Orlando to the paper town of Agloe, New York. Q, Ben, Radar, and Lacey have less than a day of almost non-stop driving to make it in time to find Margo. They quickly divide up their roles and focus on maximizing their efficiency in proceeding to their destination. This involves a number of funny incidents, such as Q accidentally buying a confederate flag shirt for Radar (who is black) to wear and Ben having to pee into a beer bottle. But in general, they are doing fine until hour twelve when Q almost runs the minivan into two cows in the middle of the road.

Q's attitude about Margo continues to fluctuate. He accepts the fact that he cannot actually become her and that he cannot fully get to know her, though he reacts furiously when Ben suggests the same to him based on his experience with Lacey. He also continues the theme of self-discovery juxtaposed against a lack of understanding of Margo. When they are about to crash into the cows, Q feels a very significant sense of resentment at Margo for drawing them into the chase which might have cost them their lives. He starts to see the costs that Margo's actions have imposed upon him and his friends.



Part Three, Houses 13-21, Agloe

Part Three, Houses 13-21, Agloe Summary

Hours thirteen through twenty-one are reasonably quiet. They spend the thirteenth hour, grateful that they didn't die. In the fourteenth hour, they clean up the minivan from the incident and watch the sun rise. In hour fifteen, Lacey makes Q rest. He falls asleep having so much fun with his friends that he finally believes that happiness without Margo is possible. Q sleeps through hours sixteen, seventeen and eighteen and wakes up in hour nineteen to Radar and Ben arguing about what Q's minivan should be named (they decide on Dreidel, as it survived the spin resulting from avoiding the cows a few hours before). They have entered New York. Ben is driving in hour twenty and Radar helps them navigate as they exit the interstate in hour twenty-one. As they reach Roscoe (the real town closest to Agloe), they try to remind themselves of Margo so they will recognize any sign of her.

The final chapter begins as Q, Ben, Radar, and Lacey find their way into the sleepy downtown of Roscoe. They search the Agloe area and find an old general store. When they enter, they find Margo in a Plexiglas quasi-cubicle, writing furiously in her black notebook. She is alive and has merely relocated. Margo is makeup-less and seems mentally dead. This, Q notes, is that woman who has known since he was two. He remarks that it is treacherous to think a person is more than a person, as he has thought of Margo. Initially Margo hugs Lacey and Q and shakes Ben and Radar's hands. She asks what they're doing there. Lacey is furious that they have driven all that way for her to act as she did. Lacey and Margo immediately start shouting at one another and Lacey storms out. Ben is angry too, telling Margo that he thought he knew her through the clues but that in the end he liked the clues more. Radar leaves as well. Q then asks Margo why she has been acting like a brat. Margo insists, as Q surmised, that when one leaves one's life that she must do it all at once. Margo believed that by leaving, everyone else could be themselves and that she could too. Q tells Margo that he thought she was dead. Quickly tempers flare, as Margo thinks Q has only come for her to seduce her and that Q is upset at Margo's accusations, particularly after coming as far as he did.

Apparently, Margo did not intend to be found nor did she mean for Q to find her. They discussed the "clues" Margo left but Margo had different intentions. She had tried to destroy any clues of herself in the minivan. And she thought the police would have found the Omnictionary clue. After Q calms them down, Margo uses his cell phone to call her mother, who immediately tells her that she changed the locks. Margo speaks to Ruthie and apologizes for not telling her where she was. After the phone conversation, Margo screams with anguish at how self-centered her mother is and reiterates how she felt like she had to leave. Lacey then calls on Q's cell phone and she and Margo talk. Margo explains to Q how she lived where she was and that she was planning to leave in the morning for New York City. Her initial plan was to travel the country. She tells Q that she had hoped to wait to leave until graduation and pull more pranks with him. But after



Jase cheated on her, she could not take it any longer. So she simply moved up her timeline and had her adventure with Q three weeks early.

Q and Margo then begin to discuss her notebook. In fourth grade, Margo had started writing a detective story about her and Q, suitably modified as heroes, tracking down the person who killed Robert Joyner. She tells Q that she had a crush on him and imagined him taking a bullet for her and dying heroically in her arms. The conversation continues as Margo explains her perspective and her desire to run away. In brief, she felt like a "paper girl" who had built her life and her social surroundings around a false, super-mysterious and interesting version of herself. She admits to a surprisingly similar view of Quentin growing up as he had of her. Quentin was a perfect hero in her eyes save his own fear. But she had not really looked into who he really was. He was to her a "paper boy." Her intention in involving Q in her pranks was to try to help him not be scared. But it turned out that hanging out with him he was much more like the hero she imagined. She actually missed him the next day.

Margo then admits to being impressed that Q had found her. Q then asks her if she would return home and proposes that she live with him and his family for the summer, but Margo declines, saying that she would get sucked back in to life there and never escape. As the conversation continues, the symmetry of their thought patterns about the other continues to be revealed. They snuggle up together on the ground, enjoying each other's company and realizing that to some extent they really had understood each other by making one another into "paper." Q dozes off for a bit and when he wakes up, Margo asks him to help her dig graves for the paper people in their minds. Q remarks that it is important to be careful about the metaphors they've used to describe themselves, particularly the metaphors of strings and grass. That the use of metaphors have implications and that the image of strings, in particular, made bad times in one's life seem more unbearable than they were. Strings make pain more fatal. Q then suggests that people are more like watertight vessels who crack and spill their contents as life wounds them and that they can only be understood through those cracks.

Q then tells Margo there is something he has to do and kisses her and she reciprocates. Margo wants him to come to New York, but Q insists that he has a life at home and that he believes in a stable future even if Margo does not. They kiss again and realize that they are headed in different directions. They hold hands and say that they will miss each other but that they will email and talk. As they walk away from each other, Margo is sobbing. Q remarks that they were giving themselves false assurances that they would stay in touch even though they knew that might not be the case. They both felt the pain of being in love but not being able to follow one another. The book ends with them holding one another in the night and Q claiming that it was now possible for him to see Margo with all her vulnerabilities and to finally see her for who she truly is.

Part Three, Houses 13-21, Agloe Analysis

Hours thirteen through twenty-one pass quickly. They have survived their bout with the cows in the street and are relieved. Q sleeps for much of this time and continues to



make observations on the nature of his experience pursuing Margo. But the core chapter is the final one, named "Algoe" after the paper town where they locate Margo. Finding Margo is the climax of the book but it is also something of an anti-climax. She is alive and seems dead to them in terms of her emotional engagement. Lacey, Ben and Radar are quickly disgusted with her bratty behavior and leave her and Q alone. They fight initially because Margo was surprised and scared and overreacted and Q was upset that Margo was not more gracious or happy to see them. After they calm down, Margo and Q review all the details of the time period covered by the book. It seems that Q had significantly overthought Margo's intentions. She had never wanted to be found and her elaborate escape plan was actually put together with some haste when she decided to leave Orlando three weeks early.

Margo reveals that her black notebook contains a story she began long ago about her and Q hunting down the killer of Robert Joyner. It seems that Margo had romanticized Q as well and that through her own soul-searching she had come to a similar realization about trying to see Q for who he is. They exchange discussion of their metaphors and frames for thinking about the other and realize their limitations. But the beauty in their discussion is that it helps them to see each other as vulnerable, as idolizing the other and it allows them to connect deeply and romantically, which manifest themselves physically in several kisses and bodily closeness. The tragedy of their love is that they have finally seen each other for who they are but that they have fundamentally different dispositions and approaches to life. Margo is not future-oriented. She still wants to travel and be a free-spirit. Q is more pragmatic and insists on the value of planning for the future. He does not want to uproot himself from his life and his friends. To do so would be to remain inauthentic. The book ends with Q and Margo in a tragic embrace, but happy to have finally met the real Margo and the real Q.



Characters

Quentin Jacobsen

Quentin or "Q" is the main character of Paper Towns. He is the narrator who tells the story from his own perspective. Q grew up with Margo but in the later childhood, their social lives went separate ways. Q became something of a nerd, hanging around with his band geek friends, Ben and Radar. Q is thoughtful, smart, careful and level-headed. He plans carefully for the future, despite a general lack of punctuality. He can be self-absorbed and obsessive but in general he is seen as a fundamentally good, kind, intelligent and confident person.

This is all true, of course, until Margo pops into Q's life again. Q is on and off again madly in love with Margo and has made her into an ideal girl in every respect. This idealizing Margo leads to the central conflict in the book, the process where Q unravels his ideal conception of Margo in his pursuit of figuring out who the real Margo is. His obsession with finding Margo leads him to not only a new view of Margo but a fundamentally new and more confident understanding of himself. On the one hand, it is a risk giving up on Margo as an ideal as the real Margo may disappoint his dreams. Conversely, there is no way to have a true, fulfilling love for Margo unless he grasps who she really is.

Margo Roth Spiegelman

Margo is Q's childhood friend and the object of his undying adoration. The two are next door neighbors and they shared the childhood experience of finding a dead body together. Unlike Q, Margo is in many ways the most popular girl in school. She is beautiful, brilliant, mysterious, adventurous, spunky and spontaneous. But she is largely responsible for her own mystique. Margo spent much of her life creating a grand image of herself as legendarily cool and fascinating. This self-conception puts a lot of pressure on Margo not only to maintain her image but to conceal herself from others. As high school progressed, she decided that she had to leave her family and friends entirely, including Q who she secretly admired from afar.

Margo is a brilliant planner of pranks and she reenters Q's life one night when she asks him to help her take her frustrations out on her ex-boyfriend and the girl he cheated on her with, along with a number of other individuals. Margo's plan had been to leave town three weeks later, after graduation, but the pressure of maintaining her status and dealing with the pain and embarrassment brought on by Jase led her to put her plan into action earlier. She thought that her plan would help to make Q more admirable and less afraid but she discovered that he was closer to her ideal than she thought. This led her to become somewhat attached to him which reinforced her decision to leave. She believed that by removing herself from her environment everyone, including her, could really be themselves.



Ben Starling

This is Q's close friend and a band geek. He is silly, ridiculous, and often self-absorbed but he is also capable of serious insight and loyalty. Despite his personal failings, Ben supports Q throughout his quest to find Margo.

Radar (Marcus)

Radar is Q's other best friend, a brilliant computer programmer and solid, reliable friend, Radar helps Q to unravel the mystery of Margo while provided Q with level-headed advice.

Lacey

This is Margo's ex-best-friend and one of the most beautiful girls in school. When she finds out that Margo blames her for not telling her about Jase, she becomes part of Q's search. She develops a romantic relationship with Ben. By the end of the book, she has become the fourth person in Q's Margo-location squad.

Robert Joyner

This is the lawyer who committed suicide whose body Margo and Q found when they were children.

Angela

This is Radar's girlfriend and sometimes part of Q's search team.

Jase Worthington

This is Margo's boyfriend who cheats on her and who Q blackmails into controlling his bully friends and maintaining social order in Margo's absence.

Becca Arrington

This is one of the most popular girls in school and the girl with whom Jase cheats on Margo.



Quentin's Parents

They are both therapists who provide a constant psychoanalytic commentary on many of the events in the story. They also form a solid contrast to Margo's parents.

Chuck Parson

This is a large bully who harassed Q in middle school and who Margo helps Q play a prank on.

Dr. Holden

This is Q's English teacher who helps him to understand Walt Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself," which helped Q locate Margo.

Otis Warren

This is the detective that Margo's parents hire to find Margo.

Margo's Parents

Self-absorbed and impatient with Margo's antics, Margo's parents form part of the reason that Margo felt she had to leave Orlando.



Objects/Places

Paper Town

While the meaning of the term changes throughout the book, the final conception of paper town is a fake town on a map that cartographers once placed on maps as "copyright traps" to locate plagiarists.

Grass

Imagery taken from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," which represents a number of things, especially the extent to which human beings are spiritually and imaginatively connected.

Margo's Black Notebook

This is the notebook that remains a mystery throughout much of the book but which records Margo's elaborate story about her, Q, and Robert Joyner.

Orlando, Florida

This is the home town for the book's main characters.

Jefferson High

This is Q and Margo's high school.

Quentin's Window

This is the place where Q viewed Margo for years and the portal through which she entered his life again and left him his first clue.

RHAPAW

This is Ben's car.

Senior Prom

This is one of the emotional focal points of the book, which Q avoids but which involve Ben, Radar, and Lacey to a great degree.



The Dreidel

This is the name of Q's van, given in honor of its ability to survive spinning out when avoiding hitting some cows in the highway.

Agloe, New York

This is the paper town where Margo was staying and where Q found her.

The Abandoned Minmall

This is the abandoned area where Margo spent a lot of her time and where Q found clues about where she had gone.

Pseudovisions

This is the name Q and others gave to abandoned subdivision projects, which Q once thought the term "paper towns" referred to and where he searched for Margo.

Omnictionary

This is the Wikipedia project maintained and edited by Radar and that Margo uses to leave clues as to her whereabouts.



Themes

Strings

Paper Towns is full of symbols, which the characters are aware of and analyze together. The first of these symbols is that of "strings," which are internal to each person's psychology. Strings are what keep each person sane and grounded in their particular time and place. When one's strings break, she is gradually removed from this state of normalcy. The metaphor first makes its entry when Margo and Quentin encounter the dead body of Robert Joyner. It is remarked that Joyner killed himself since he could no longer handle his life after divorce and depression. But the metaphor is most applicable to Margo, whose strings may have begun to break on that day. It is Margo who draws the string metaphor with reference to herself. The pressure she placed on herself to be cool and mysterious alienated her from her family and her friends. As time went on, her strings broke until she felt the needed to totally uproot her life in Orlando and leave. When she discovered that Jase cheated on her, that was the last "string" to break and lead her to leave for Agloe, New York.

One important feature of Paper Towns is the presence of discussions of whether the primary metaphors in the book are accurate. In the end, Margo and Q agree that all metaphors exaggerate some aspects of reality and underplay others. The problem with the "strings" metaphor is that it gave too much power to external events in one's life to permanently alter one's ability to function.

Paper Towns

Another important symbol in the book (and the metaphor for which the book is named), the meaning of "paper towns" changes over the course of the book. The metaphor is first employed by Margo when she and Q are looking at Orlando from high in the SunTrust building. She uses "paper towns" to refer to fake people and fake communities that she found unbearable. When Margo runs away, she leaves a message for Q referring to paper towns but it is not clear what she means. For much of the book, Q thought Margo was referring to abandoned subdivisions, which someone in an internet forum described as paper towns. This led Q to the abandoned minimall where he found evidence of Margo's presence, but it also led him to wonder whether she was still alive. The final interpretation of paper towns came when Quentin discovered that a "paper town" was a town found on a map that could not be found in reality. Cartographers once placed paper towns on their maps to see if other maps included them, which they would count as evidence that their map was plagiarized rather than made from scratch. In the book, Algoe, New York is the paper town where Margo has hidden herself and to where Q, Ben, Lacey, and Radar travel in Part III of the book.

In the end, however, the idea of a paper town takes on a greater meaning as the idea of "paper" starts to be applied not merely to towns but to people and, most importantly, to



Margo and Q. They both had paper images of the other, false pictures that they had created over the course of their lives that reflected more about themselves than the reality of the other. Margo also refers to herself as a "paper girl" due to her practice of creating a larger than life public persona.

Grass

The grass metaphor arose from Quentin's reading of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" or the poem that Margo uses to send a cryptic message to Quentin. Quentin grapples with the poem at great length, though he has trouble getting through it. Both Margo and Quentin use parts of the poem to refer to various ideas and symbols in their own lives and minds, but there is one metaphor in the poem that is somewhat beyond them and that plays a significant role in the book. In the poem, Whitman uses the metaphor of grass to refer to all sorts of large concepts, life, death, friendship, the connection of all humans, and so on. It has many meanings, but what it means to Quentin is the ability of humans to imaginatively enter into the lives of others.

The grass metaphor suggests that all human beings are connected in profound ways not only through their shared experiences but in terms of their private consciousness. Quentin takes from the metaphor the realization that he has a false understanding of Margo and that his natural connection with her should allow him to think like her and even "become" her in order to find her. He struggles to understand the real Margo not only to find her but to validate and realize the love that he has for her. But ultimately the grass metaphor also has its drawbacks because Quentin realizes that you cannot become anyone else or fully step out of one's own point of view. Others can only be grasped when they honestly disclose themselves, which Margo and Q do for one another at the end of the book.



Style

Point of View

Paper Towns is written from the first-person perspective of Quentin Jacobsen. Quentin narrates most of the story in real time. He explains what he is thinking and doing at each moment. Early in the book, when Quentin flashes back to his childhood, he tells his story in the past tense but again always from his direct and conscious experience. The author never enters into the internal mental lives of the other characters in the book. Everything is interpolated through Quentin's point of view. However, one important feature of the book is Quentin's attempt to reason about the mental states and emotional states of others, especially and overwhelmingly his ability to imagine Margo's inner mental life. Ultimately Margo reveals her thoughts to Quentin, but they are all presented through Quentin's perspective.

The point of view of the book is also set by the author in his explanation of the book and its themes both before and after the story. But he also seems to insert his own perspective throughout the book in the form of Quentin's parents, both of whom are therapists. Quentin's parents are oblivious to much of what Quentin is doing and yet still make thoughtful psychoanalytic remarks about various characters in the book. They also repeatedly affirm Quentin's fundamental goodness, which seems to keep him confident and level-headed, though he rarely says as much. So in general the point of view is in the first-person and present perspective, but there are also explicit and implicit exceptions.

Setting

Paper towns is set in Orlando, Florida at some point in the very early 21st century. The prevalence of cell phones, first-person shooter computer games, instant messaging, digital cameras, and a Wikipedia equivalent called Omnictionary strongly suggest it. The main events of the book occur in and around Jefferson High School where nearly all of the main characters are seniors. The book occurs almost entirely during the last month of high school, which includes events like final exams, senior prom, and graduation. The story begins about a month before graduation just before Margo decides to sneak into Quentin's bedroom and take him on an all-night adventure. She then disappears for three weeks until Quentin and his friends finally track him down. In the meanwhile, the main specific settings are Quentin's house, the high school, and the various locales that Quentin and his friends visit. At first these are by and large abandoned buildings in what they call "pseudovisions" or abandoned subdivision projects. The main case of these settings is the abandoned minimall where Margo spent much of her time.

In Part III, the setting changes substantially. It is almost entirely set in Quentin's new minivan, which Ben and Radar name The Dreidel after its ability to spin sufficiently



quickly to avoid hitting several cows. The final destination of the book is the abandoned general store building in the paper town of Agloe, New York where Quentin finds Margo.

Language and Meaning

Paper Towns is written from the perspective of an intelligent and computer-literate male teenager. The language and meaning of the book reflects the pieces of media that he would encounter in the early 21st century in the United States. In short, this means that Quentin is not wholly averse to complex vocabulary but also uses a variety of internet slang terms. Further, he often refers to ideas that he derives from his therapist parents and from his high school reading of various classic books and poems such as Moby Dick and Song of Myself. The form of the book also somewhat reflects these variations, as the book will on occasion include long quotations from important poems and even transcripts from Quentin's IM conversations with Ben, Radar, and Lacey.

Perhaps most significant about the language of the book is the widespread use of metaphors such as those discussed in the themes - paper towns, strings, and grass - which are derived from a variety of different physical and electronic media. An unusual feature of Paper Towns is that it includes self-conscious discussion and analysis of the major symbols in the book. Quentin makes all the deep themes of the book explicit. Thus the language and meaning of the book contains subtleties that are analyzed in detail by the main characters.

Structure

Paper Towns is divided into three parts, each of which have their own distinctive structure. The story begins with a prologue that explains Margo and Quentin's common childhood experience, but the book then flashes forward to the day before Margo sneaks into Quentin's room. Then the rest of Part I, the Strings, is divided up into chapters that loosely correspond to the eleven parts of Margo's plan. As a result, the first part occurs largely over the span of twenty-four hours. Its nine chapters contain a number of smaller events and the psychological analysis that accompanies them. Given its title, Part I focuses on the metaphor of strings and how Margo's experiences during the previous few days had broken some of hers.

Part II, The Grass, contains twenty chapters that span over the three-week period between Margo's disappearance and Quentin's decision to travel to Agloe, New York. The chapters cover a number of events, including senior prom, final exams, graduation, the exploration of several pseudo-visions, and Quentin's nearly boundless obsession with finding Margo. Quentin's obsession never ends despite the events around him including the end of high school that his friends and family were focused. Part II is the longest bit of the book and contains half of the book.

Part III, The Vessel, begins with Quentin, Ben, Radar, and Lacey racing to load up his new minivan to travel to Agloe, New York. It covers a twenty-four hour period. Part III is therefore divided into twenty-two parts, of which the first twenty-one are designated by

the hour in question that the text refers to. The final part of Part III is "Agloe" which ends the book with Quentin's encounter with Margo, resolving the main tensions in the book.



Quotes

"My miracle was this: out of all the houses in all the subdivisions in all of Florida, I ended up living next door to Margo Roth Spiegelman." (Prologue, p. 3).

"Margo always loved mysteries. And in everything that came afterward, I could never stop thinking that maybe she loved mysteries so much that she became one." (Prologue, p. 8).

"And so May fifth could have been any day—until just before midnight, when Margo Roth Spiegelman slid open my screenless bedroom window for the first time since telling me to close it nine years before." (Chapter 1, p. 24).

"The thing about Margo Roth Spiegelman is that really all I could ever do was let her talk, and then when she stopped talking encourage her to go on, due to the facts that 1. I was incontestably in love with her, and 2. She was absolutely unprecedented in every way, and 3. She never really asked me any questions, so the only way to avoid silence was to keep her talking." (Chapter 3, p. 31).

"We bring the fucking rain, Q. Not the scattered showers." (Chapter 5, p. 49).

"Here's what's not beautiful about it: from here, you can't see the rust or the cracked paint or whatever, but you can tell what the place really is. You see how fake it all is. It's not even hard enough to be made out of plastic. It's a paper town." (Chapter 6, p. 57).

"I didn't need you, you idiot. I picked you. And then you picked me back." (Chapter 8, p. 70).

"I wanted to tell her that the pleasure for me wasn't planning or doing or leaving; the pleasure was in seeing our strings cross and separate and then come back together—but that seemed too cheesy to say, and anyway, she was standing up." (Chapter 8, p. 78).

"I. Will. Miss. Hanging. Out. With. You." (Chapter 9, p. 81).

"But listen, kid, that string gets cut all the times." (Part II, Chapter 3, p. 105).

"Maybe Margo needed to see my confidence. Maybe this time she wanted to be found, and to be found by me. Maybe - just as she had chosen me on the longest night, she had chosen me again. And maybe untold riches awaited he who found her." (Part II, Chapter 4, p. 115).

"I don't know who she is anymore, or who she was, but I need to find her." (Part II, Chapter 8, p. 141).

"You will go to the paper towns and you will never come back." (Part II, Chapter 9, p. 149).



"I will play out the string. I will not betray your trust. I will find you." (Part II, Chapter 10, p. 155).

"And I realize that I cannot imagine them because I didn't know Margo." (Part II, Chapter 12, p. 170).

"You know your problem, Quentin? You keep expected people not to be themselves." (Part II, Chapter 14, p. 194).

"The fundamental mistake I had always made - and that she had, in fairness, always led me to make - was this: Margo was not a miracle. She was not an adventure. She was not a fine and precious thing. She was a girl." (Part II, Chapter 15, p. 199).

"To find Margo Roth Spiegelman, you must become Margo Roth Spiegelman." (Part II, Chapter 19, p. 226).

"There is a corner of the world somewhere far away from here where no one knows what 'Margo Roth Spiegelman' means. And Margo is sitting in that corner, scrawling in her black notebook." (Part II, Chapter 20, p. 234).

"We can hear others, and we can travel to them without moving, and we can imagine them, and we are all connected one to the other by a crazy root system like so many leaves of grass—but the game makes me wonder whether we can really ever fully become one another." (Part III, Hour Six, p. 258).

"People are different when you can smell them and see them up close, you know?" (Part III, Hour Twelve, p. 266).

"But there she is, and I am watching her through the Plexiglas, and she looks like Margo Roth Spiegelman, this girl I have known since I was two—this girl who was an idea that I loved." (Part III, Agloe, p. 282).

"You had been a paper boy to me all these years—two dimensions as a character on the page and two different, but still flat, dimensions as a person. But that night you turned out to be real." (Part III, Agloe, p. 292).

"A paper town for a paper girl." (Part III, Agloe, p. 293).

"Yes, I can see her almost perfectly in this cracked darkness." (Part III, Agloe, p. 305).



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the many meanings of "paper town" in the book. Do those meanings mirror events or elements in the book? If so, how so?

Who is the real Margo? Why?

Why did Margo feel that she had to leave?

Explain the significance of Q's realization that Margo "was not an adventure" but "a girl."

What do Q's conception of Margo and Margo's conception of Q have in common? Where do they differ?

Compare and contrast Margo and Q's philosophies of life. Why do those philosophies of life lead them in different directions?

Explain Q's parents' metaphors of mirrors and windows and their relation to the themes of the book.