

Real Live Boyfriends: Yes. Boyfriends, Plural. If My Life Weren't Complicated, I Wouldn't Be Ruby Oliver Study Guide

Real Live Boyfriends: Yes. Boyfriends, Plural. If My Life Weren't Complicated, I Wouldn't Be Ruby Oliver by E. Lockhart

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Plot Summary

Real Live Boyfriends is the story of seventeen-year-old Ruby Oliver's struggle to discover which boyfriend Noel or Gideon, is her real live boyfriend, following a strict set of rules.

As the final book in the Ruby Oliver series, Real Live Boyfriends picks up where the previous books left off. Ruby Oliver is still neurotic and somewhat self-absorbed, but her time with psychiatrist Doctor Z has helped her mature. When the novel opens, Ruby is in a blissful relationship with her boyfriend, Noel. Ruby never has to think about whether Noel wants to be around her, wants to kiss her, or thinks she's funny, because he's her real boyfriend. Of course those things are true. He always calls when he says he will, he always picks her up on time, and they always sit together at lunch because their relationship is real and everyone around them knows it. For the first time in a long time, Ruby feels confident and comfortable in her relationship.

But when Noel leaves for a summer in New York City, things begin to change for Ruby. At first, Noel is very engaged, calling Ruby all the time and sending her love poems. When Gideon Van Deusen stops by to ask for a band-aid, Ruby isn't bothered. She's still very attracted to Gideon and when he asks her if she has a boyfriend, she doesn't hesitate to tell him. However, there's something strange about the way Noel's been acting, but in Ruby's mind, that isn't enough to cheat on him with the boy of her dreams. She confidently pushes aside Gideon's advances, but when Noel's behavior suddenly changes, she begins to second-guess their relationship. Out of nowhere, Noel's calls stop. He doesn't send any emails or pick up the phone when Ruby calls. He clearly doesn't want to spend time with Ruby and she's outraged. At least he could explain to Ruby what's gone wrong. Instead, Noel chooses the silent treatment, mooding and brooding all day long, refusing to talk to Ruby.

The two get into a massive fight and break up. Ruby begins dating Gideon Van Deusen, although in real life, he isn't as dreamy as she'd always imagined. Even his kissing is a bit sloppy. But he's a genuinely good guy who cares about Ruby. He calls, he writes, and he picks her up on time. But in the back of her mind, Ruby is still always thinking about Noel. When she sees Noel's brother at the zoo one afternoon, he tells her that while he was in New York, Noel saw his friend killed in a biking accident. His friend had died right in front of his eyes and there was nothing Noel could do to save him. Ruby is horrified! How could she have been so selfish and so self-centered to think that Noel's attitude change had something to do with her? She hadn't even asked if everything was all right in his life! She races over to his house in the middle of the night and pulls him out of bed. Before they even speak, the two start kissing and soon, Noel is crying. He tells Ruby everything about the accident and about his emotions. The two are able to connect on a new level that is more mature and respectful than the giddy teenage love they'd previously experienced. Ruby Oliver is becoming a young woman and she's found true love in the process.



Chapters 1 - 3: Real Live Boyfriends!; The Insanity of My Parents! And Romance!; Panic Attacks and Rabbit Fever!

Chapters 1 - 3: Real Live Boyfriends!; The Insanity of My Parents! And Romance!; Panic Attacks and Rabbit Fever! Summary

Real live boyfriends are boyfriends who don't contribute to your angst. If you have one, you never have to worry if he'll call, if you'll have plans together over the weekend, or if you can sit with him during lunch break. He's your real live boyfriend. All throughout her life, Ruby Oliver has struggled to find a real live boyfriend. Her first perfect boyfriend, Tommy Hazard, was imaginary. Her second boyfriend, Jackson, left her for her best friend. Now, her real live boyfriend is Noel. He's scrawny, asthmatic, and awkward, but he is with her and she's happy with him. While sitting with her best friend Meghan at the B&O coffee shop, Ruby writes down the proper definition of a real live boyfriend in her notebook. Later that night, her mother finds it and reads it aloud, wondering if her husband is a proper boyfriend or not. Ruby is mortified, but this is what life is like for her on the houseboat with her parents.

Ruby is working on a short film for her college applications and plans to interview everyone close to her for the project. The first person she interviews is Noel. It's summer and the couple sits in Ruby's father's greenhouse, laughing and kissing in front of the camera. When she discusses her project with Doctor Z (her therapist) later that week, Doctor Z is skeptical. Ruby and Noel have had a bumpy past, and she worries about Ruby letting him get too close. For her part, Ruby doesn't think Doctor Z truly understands how she feels, but she's getting better at expressing her emotions. Ruby says that Noel feels like a flashlight guiding her through the dark. At the end of their session, Doctor Z asks, "What happens if your flashlight goes out?" (p. 25).

Chapters 1 - 3: Real Live Boyfriends!; The Insanity of My Parents! And Romance!; Panic Attacks and Rabbit Fever! Analysis

In the opening section of the novel, the author introduces the definition of a real live boyfriend. In all the previous novels in this collection, Ruby Oliver has struggled with her love life. Now that she has a boyfriend, Ruby wants to know if he's a "real live boyfriend" or a fake boyfriend. Fake boyfriends don't call when they say then will, make plans with



their friends instead of with you, and generally treat their girlfriends like disposable make-out buddies. With an opening like this, the reader can safely assume that the main conflict of the novel will be Ruby deciding whether her boyfriend Noel is "real live" or fake.

The majority of this section is used to catch readers up on what they've missed in the previous three books. When Ruby began high school, she had a group of three close friends (Kim, Cricket, and Nora) and a gorgeous boyfriend, Jackson. When Jackson left her and began dating Kim, Ruby began suffering panic attacks. Her friends abandoned her, and she became an outcast in school. Ruby sees a psychiatrist, Doctor Z, to help manage her panic attacks and each of the books in the collection is written from Ruby's perspective as she collects her thoughts for her meetings with Doctor Z. Ruby also has a strained relationship with her mother, Elaine. Elaine is prone to drastic lifestyle changes and is currently forcing her family to eat a raw diet (no cooked foods). Elaine Oliver is somewhat self-centered, dramatic, and isolating. This relationship has been at the center of many conflicts in the Ruby Oliver collection.



Chapter Four: The Revelation About Gay Chinese Penguins!

Chapter Four: The Revelation About Gay Chinese Penguins! Summary

During the summer, Ruby's grandma Suzette falls ill and dies. She was always a good grandma, someone Ruby was very close to, and she wasn't expected to pass away so quickly. Ruby went to visit her in the hospital before she died and her last words to Ruby were, "I'm going to take a nap now. Don't drink my orange juice" (p. 29). Those last words haunt Ruby because they don't make any sense. At the funeral, Ruby cries when grandma's friends give their speeches about what a lovely woman she was. Her father is absolutely beside himself with grief. After the funeral, on her way to the cemetery, Ruby runs into her ex-best friend, Nora, who has come to offer her condolences to the family. Ruby is shocked to see Nora there. Because there's no one else there to drive Ruby to the cemetery, Nora offers to take her. The ride over is somewhat awkward, but Nora does what she can to break the ice, telling Ruby about her new boyfriend. Ruby does what she can to apologize to Nora. Nora accused Ruby of stealing Noel from her, but like everything Ruby does, the apology she offers comes out awkward and confusing. It appears however as if the girls have made up, although they will never be best friends again.

Once again working on her video, Ruby interviews her friend, Hutch, about popularity, a particularly difficult topic for him since he lost most of his friends in middle school. Meanwhile, Ruby's dad continues to mourn the death of his mother, and his wife, Ruby's mother, is emotionally unsupportive.

Chapter Four: The Revelation About Gay Chinese Penguins! Analysis

In this section, Ruby's grandmother dies. This affects Ruby in many ways. First, she must deal with death for the first time in her life. It is a traumatic experience for Ruby because she was quite close to her grandmother. Her grandmother's last words were a request that Ruby not drink her orange juice. This doesn't make sense to Ruby because she's never tried to drink her grandmother's juice in the past. How could those possibly be her last words to her? It feels so unfinished: "That was it. It wasn't a real goodbye. It was so unfinished. I hate when things are unfinished. When you're not sure what people meant" (p. 29 - 30). Grandma Suzette's death is certainly traumatic for Ruby, but the confusion around saying goodbye and the frustration of not knowing what a person means when they say goodbye is foreshadowing to Ruby's relationship with Noel. As the novel progresses, Ruby will struggle to deal with Noel's abrupt goodbye, and the emotional backlash Ruby feels when confronted by her confusion.



Grandma Suzette's death also functions to bring Ruby and Nora back together. Nora had once been one of Ruby's best friends, but after Nora accused Ruby of stealing Noel from her, the two girls have been icily ignoring each other. At Grandma Suzette's funeral, however, Nora makes the first move by apologizing. Now that Nora has a new boyfriend, it is probably much easier for her to forgive Ruby. The heartbreak she once felt over Noel has been replaced with infatuation for someone new. In reference to "stealing" Noel, Ruby compares herself to a gay Chinese penguin. At the zoo, a pair of gay Chinese penguins continually tried to steal an egg from a traditional penguin pair. The gay penguins stole the egg multiple times and the zookeeper returns the egg to its rightful parents each time. Eventually, the zookeeper gave the gay penguins an egg of their own. Ruby compares herself to the gay penguins, stealing something because they're so desperate to have it. Ruby was so desperate to have a boyfriend that she "stole" Noel from Nora. Now she is paying the price, but it appears Nora is open to reconciliation.



Chapters 5 & 6: Agony and Love Poems!; Distractions Caused by a Bare Chest!

Chapters 5 & 6: Agony and Love Poems!; Distractions Caused by a Bare Chest! Summary

While she shoots her film, Ruby asks Noel to define friendship. He says that a friend is someone who wants your updates, even the boring, sad and cute ones. He says that he wants to hear all Ruby's updates, especially because he's leaving for New York to visit his brother Claude and won't be able to call Ruby every day. When he leaves, Ruby knows that Noel is her "real live boyfriend" because he calls from places like the Guggenheim or a cheap dumpling place, just to say "hi" and how much he misses her. Then one day he doesn't call. Or respond to any of Ruby's emails. The next day is Ruby's seventeenth birthday so she's sure she'll get a call from Noel, or a gift, or at least a card in the mail, but the day passes and she hears nothing. The day after Ruby's birthday, Noel sends her a poem outlining how he misses her as he would miss an amputated limb. Although she loves the poem, Ruby is still angry. Ruby calls; Ruby writes, but still, she hears nothing. A few days later, another poem arrives. Noel is counting down the days until her returns home to Seattle, hoping his happiness will start again. Ruby fluctuates back and forth between being angry and being flattered. She decides she'll have to sort everything out with Noel, and decide if he's her "real live boyfriend" after all at Hutch's going away party.

Videoing her friend Finn Murphy, Ruby asks what true love is. Finn says that love is when someone has the power to crush your soul and you trust them not to. This opens up a host of questions for Ruby (what if someone crushes your heart anyway, does that mean it wasn't love?) that Finn can't answer. Later that day, Ruby is outside working on the garden, when Gideon Van Deusen pulls up in his motorboat saying that he's just about to run out of gas. He leaps out of the boat dripping wet and without a shirt, startling Ruby, who's always been attracted to him. He has a cut on his leg and asks if Ruby has a band-aid. Inside, Ruby quickly puts on lip gloss and smoothes her hair before bringing Gideon the band-aid. She puts it on his leg, carefully tending to his wound. Clearly flirting, Gideon asks if Ruby has a boyfriend. She says she's not sure. Before he leaves, Gideon tells Ruby to figure things out and then give him a call.

Chapters 5 & 6: Agony and Love Poems!; Distractions Caused by a Bare Chest! Analysis

In this section, Ruby's relationship with Noel is tested. He's in New York City when he suddenly stops calling Ruby and he even misses her birthday. Missing her birthday



should signal to the reader (and to Ruby) that something major is going on in Noel's life. Initially, it seems that Noel might have found a new girlfriend in the city and that is why he's ignoring Ruby, but the poem he sends the day after Ruby's birthday, filled with images of blood and wounds, suggests something a bit darker. Noel claims to miss Ruby desperately, which suggests that he is either a terrible liar, or the emotion behind his "love poem" is something other than guilt. As the novel progresses, the reader will learn that Noel has actually suffered a terrible tragedy in New York, and this poem is clearly a cry for help. Without admitting his grief to Ruby, lines like "I miss you like a limb, like a leg I've lost in a war, maybe in an accident, maybe in a tragedy" are begging for Ruby's care. He writes that he feels off balance without her, insinuating that he will need Ruby's support when he returns home. The poem is frustratingly vague (for both Ruby and the reader), yet it's clear something in Noel's life is amiss.

Meanwhile, Ruby is temporarily distracted from her Noel-centered confusion when Gideon Van Deusen arrives with a clear agenda: to woo Ruby. Gideon's arrival creates a new conflict for Ruby. She has always had a crush on Gideon, long before she even began dating Noel. Now that Noel is acting strangely, Gideon seems extra attractive and extra attentive. Ruby finds herself flirting with Gideon even though she hasn't yet broken up with Noel. Before readers judge Ruby, it should be noted that Ruby herself is confused by her flirting and notes that her interaction with Gideon is wrong. She wants to figure out what's happening with Noel before her emotions are clouded by a new relationship. For readers of the series, this is a much more mature thought process than what they are used to. In previous books, Ruby would have jumped headlong into a new relationship without thinking of the repercussions. This is just one of the many ways Lockhart signals Ruby's emotional growth to her readers.



Chapter Seven: Humiliation at Snappy Dragon!

Chapter Seven: Humiliation at Snappy Dragon! Summary

In her interview for Ruby's film, Meghan defines love as a feeling like listening to music or watching a ballet where the beauty consumes you. A frustrated Ruby admits that the love she feels for Noel doesn't feel that way, leaving Meghan to question whether Ruby's feeling is love after all. To keep her mind off Noel, Ruby arranges a going-away party for Hutch, who is leaving to study abroad in Paris for a semester. She invites Meghan, her parents, and Noel to dinner at the Snappy Dragon Chinese Restaurant and then for white chocolate cake at a nearby bakery. She calls Noel three times (he should be home from New York by now) but he doesn't answer. In the car, Ruby admits that she hasn't heard anything from Noel, but Hutch tells her not to worry. He's Noel's best friend and he hasn't heard anything from him yet either. Hutch picks up the phone to prove his point to Ruby, but Noel answers. Ruby is mortified. Why is Noel answering Hutch's calls but not hers? When Hutch asks if he's coming to the party tonight, Noel claims that he's too tired. At dinner, Ruby is concentrating so hard on not crying that she can't even enjoy her food. Her father is also beside himself with emotion as each dish seems to remind him of his dead mother. Ruby's mother announces that she's decided to give up bathing as a way of combating her dry skin. At the thought of having a smelly mother (on top of every other embarrassment her family has caused her), Ruby snaps. She starts a massive fight with her mother in the middle of the restaurant, and her mother, who never backs down from a fight, storms out of the restaurant dragging her husband along with her.

When Ruby's rage levels and she looks around, she is shocked to see Noel standing in the corner of the restaurant. He walks over looking pale and shaky, and lays his head down on the table. Ruby is beside herself with emotion, which steadily climbs back to rage when Noel barely greets her. There is no kiss, hug, or even handshake. Ruby realizes that her relationship with Noel is over. She throws a twenty-dollar bill on the table and runs out of the restaurant, half-expecting Noel to chase her. He doesn't and Ruby realizes how stupid she's been acting. With her parents gone, she does not have a ride home and she left her jacket at the restaurant table. Thankfully, Meghan pulls up in her Jeep to give Ruby a ride home.

Chapter Seven: Humiliation at Snappy Dragon! Analysis

As Ruby interviews her friends and family about love, each of the definitions seems to contradict what she's feeling about Noel, suggesting that perhaps she and Noel are not



truly in love. The problem with these simple definitions is just that, they're too simple. Love and relationships are complex, complicated, and constantly changing. No relationship - if it's real - can be neatly defined in one sentence or less. A perfect example of this is Ruby's relationship with her mother. Obviously Ruby and her mother love each other and would never intentionally harm the other, but they butt heads about many things and have extreme, violent reactions when they feel wronged. At the Snappy Dragon, Ruby uses her mother's antics as an outlet for her frustration about Noel. Because she's already in a bad mood, Ruby snaps at her mother, taking out her aggression when (even Ruby admits) her mother doesn't deserve it. For her part, Elaine feels unsupported by her family and Ruby's blatant disrespect in the restaurant goes too far. She, too, snaps, calling Ruby "a disrespectful, unsympathetic, shallow brat who has no idea what it's like to be searching for something" (p. 72). Of course this is the furthest thing from the truth. Ruby knows very well what it feels like to be searching for something (love) but something holds her back from communicating this with her mother. Ruby struggles to communicate how she's truly feeling with those who matter, which is clearly at the center of her many conflicts. Many times throughout the novel, Ruby expresses (only internally) that she wishes she were more outspoken about her feelings, yet she remains passive. Even when she runs out of the restaurant, a part of her hopes Noel will chase her, that he will be the acting agent in their relationship, instead of taking charge and confronting him herself.



Chapters 8 & 9: Surprise Kissing!; The Waketastic Adventure!

Chapters 8 & 9: Surprise Kissing!; The Waketastic Adventure! Summary

The next day, Ruby writes an email to Hutch to apologize for her behavior at his party last night. Hutch writes back that it's no problem, but he's boarding his flight to Paris, so he doesn't have long to chat. Ruby works a long day at the zoo and then drives to Noel's house, presumably to confront him about what's been going on. She never gets to ask him because when Noel sees her, he runs out of the house and begins kissing her. Ruby is so happy (Noel still wants to be with her) that she finds herself forgiving his erratic behavior and tendencies toward abandonment. They go to a movie and Ruby thinks to herself, "Noel was here. Noel still wanted me. I told myself I was utterly, completely happy" (p. 87). When she discusses his return with Doctor Z, however, the doctor is less convinced. She asks Ruby a plethora of questions and eventually, Ruby admits it: she's not happy at all. She wants Noel to apologize for missing her birthday and forgetting to call and stopping answering her emails. As she sits in Doctor Z's office, Ruby realizes she doesn't have a real live boyfriend after all. Noel is an imposter and she's fallen for his tricks.

A few days later, after another small fight with her mother, Ruby is once again surprised to see Gideon Van Deusen pulling up to her dock. This time, he's more upfront. He wants to take Ruby waterskiing and he won't take no for an answer. At this point, Noel hasn't called in three days. Ruby is angry with him, but she still wants to be honest. She agrees to go with Gideon, but only after she calls Noel. Of course he doesn't answer. Ruby leaves a message telling him to call her back right away, but twenty minutes later, he still hasn't called. With a clear conscience since Noel has made it very clear that he no longer wants to be her boyfriend, Ruby changes into her bathing suit and joins Gideon on the boat. She has a wonderful time with him as he teaches her how to water-ski. She thinks to herself, Gideon would make an excellent boyfriend. He has all the qualities to make a great "real live boyfriend" yet she can't stop thinking about Noel. Later that night, Noel comes over and Ruby thinks he's acting like a lobotomized patient. He barely reacts to what Ruby says, fails to make eye contact, but insists that everything is fine.

Chapters 8 & 9: Surprise Kissing!; The Waketastic Adventure! Analysis

Ruby's relationship with Hutch is interesting. It's clear to the reader that Hutch is in love with her and probably has been for some time (he notices her lip gloss, comments on her flirtatious behavior with other boys, organizes a film festival to spend time with her,



eats food she likes that he doesn't like, answers her emails immediately, and refuses to talk about Noel with her) but Ruby is oblivious to his crush. Although it isn't explored in the text, it's clear that Hutch would be the perfect "real live" boyfriend if Ruby ever opened her eyes to him. Sadly, this novel is the final novel in the Ruby Oliver series and a relationship between Ruby and Hutch is not meant to be.

Meanwhile, Noel is continuing to show strong symptoms of depression: withdrawal, low energy, failure to maintain relationships, and Ruby is certain his change in attitude has something to do with her. In this section, she does ask Noel if anything is wrong, and he insists everything is fine. This time, Ruby's frustration is understandable. She's done the right thing and asked Noel directly what is bothering him. It is up to Noel to meet Ruby in the middle. He has to open up if he wants to feel supported. It should be no wonder that Ruby is attracted to Gideon Van Deusen, and the longer Noel keeps up his withdrawn attitude, the more likely it will be that Ruby leaves him, and if she does, the reader shouldn't blame her.

While she is in Doctor Z's office, Ruby exclaims that she wishes people weren't so terrible at apologizing. If Noel would simply acknowledge how he's hurt Ruby's feelings and do his best not to repeat his behaviors, everything would be fine between them. Ruby places most of the blame for her separation from Noel on Noel. Likewise, Ruby blames most of the tension in her relationship with her mother on her mother. The only thing Elaine wants from Ruby is a sincere apology - just as Ruby wants only a sincere apology from Noel - to make everything better, but Ruby flatly refuses. This shows the reader that Ruby's emotional maturity is still unbalanced and she has a bit of growing up to do.



Chapter Ten: An Agonizing Public Scene! With Violence!

Chapter Ten: An Agonizing Public Scene! With Violence! Summary

During an interview with Ruby about popularity, Meghan admits that she never felt like she had friends until Ruby and Nora began spending time with her. Until then, she was always defined by her romantic relationships and not her friendships. School starts and Ruby is still on fighting terms with her mother. Her mother has drastically changed her diet to include meat (consuming meals made entirely of meat) even though Ruby is a vegetarian. When Ruby accuses her mother of selfishly cooking meat just to annoy her, Elaine says, "It's not about making you crack...I just think you will" (p. 106). On the first day of school, Ruby realizes that she has no one to sit with at lunch. Her old friends (Cricket, Kim, and on some level Nora) have turned against her, and she has no desire to sit with Noel. If she sits with him, she'll have to fake that everything is fine, and she no longer wants to fake her emotions with him.

As a part of their graduation process, all the high school seniors must attend a class about college applications. There, the students visualize what college they should attend, take practice admissions exams, and fill out college questionnaires. One questionnaire, meant to be filled out by a friend, gives college applicants a deeper understanding of their character. As a peace offering, Ruby gives her friendship questionnaire to Noel but he doesn't return the gesture.

Instead, he passes Ruby a note asking if she went out on a date with Gideon Van Deusen. Out loud, disturbing the entire class, Ruby swears nothing happened. She begins shouting at Noel, in front of everyone, that he can't be so jealous if he wants their relationship to work. When he fails to quiet Ruby, the teacher throws her, and Noel, out of the classroom. In the staircase, Noel looks as if he's about to cry when he says, "I came back from New York and I thought you would make me happy but I'm not happy" (p. 119). Frustrated, Ruby pushes Noel away from her and he falls, hard, down the stairs.

Chapter Ten: An Agonizing Public Scene! With Violence! Analysis

Ruby's fight with her mother is a bizarre but believable scenario. They've been at each other's throats for weeks with neither of them budging. It's interesting to note that Ruby doesn't support her mother's life changes and Elaine doesn't support her daughter's vegetarianism, yet both accuse the other of being unsupportive. The conflict between these similarly bullheaded characters stretches to the end of the novel and is never fully



resolved. It is unclear what message Lockhart is sending to her readers, particularly because she dedicates so much "space" in the novel to this fight and it is never resolved. Perhaps Lockhart is highlighting the realization that in "real life," problems aren't magically solved. In real relationships, conflict bubbles and brews under the surface for months, if not years, of one's life. She might also be suggesting that even though Ruby has done a lot of growing over this four-book series, she is still a teenager and has bit more maturing to do.

Ruby's immaturity is highlighted by the fight she starts with Noel during guidance class. It's clear that Ruby feels guilty about her "date" with Gideon, which is why she's so defensive, so emphatic that nothing happened. She interrupts the class, embarrassing herself and Noel, just to prove a point: ironically, that Noel's emotions are irrational. During the argument, Ruby thinks only of herself, how misunderstood and neglected she is. She doesn't think about the way these rumors (that she is secretly dating Gideon) might have affected Noel. Noel's bloody fingernails, erratic breathing, and pale skin assure the reader that Noel is suffering from a completely debilitating stress, but Ruby doesn't have the time to nurture him. She wants her answers now, at any cost. Meanwhile, the fights at home escalate. Elaine has come up with a new restaurant idea, but her husband and daughter are highly unsupportive. Elaine feels cut down, undermined, and rejected at home, very similar to how Ruby feels in her relationship with Noel.



Chapters 11 & 12: The Wenchery of Cricket and Kim!; Secrets of the Panda Bear!

Chapters 11 & 12: The Wenchery of Cricket and Kim!; Secrets of the Panda Bear! Summary

The fight between Ruby and her mother wages on, with Elaine filling out her parent questionnaire with cutting, stinging remarks about her daughter's personality. When she finds it, Ruby tears it up into small pieces and flushes it down the toilet. She tells Doctor Z that it was strangely liberating. Senior year carries on for Ruby without Noel in her life. It's strange, restructuring her day without him. She must even avoid him in the hallways so she doesn't burst into tears when she sees him. She has managed to avoid full-scale panic attacks by taking off her glasses (rendering the world around her fuzzy) and humming the song "We Will Rock You" whenever Noel speaks in class. That way, she's almost erased him from her life. After swim practice one afternoon, Ruby bumps into Nora Van Deusen at the coffee shop. Nora has just had a very unsettling experience with Cricket and Kim. After having a three-way conversation with them and thinking her line had hung up, Nora overheard her "friends" making very disparaging remarks about her and laughing at her expense. They even say that they can't stand hanging around her and that they should make up a code-word so they can both ditch her at the same time. Nora is heartbroken. She had no idea Cricket and Kim felt this way about her.

A few days later, Gideon Van Deusen comes back into town and asks to take Ruby out for Halloween. Her parents have a massive fight about their costumes and Elaine decides to leave her family for a while. She's going on vacation on her own, she says, because her family doesn't appreciate her. She storms out of the house, leaving her husband lying on the floor in a clear state of depression. When the phone rings, Ruby can't get to it fast enough. She welcomes the opportunity to get out of the house. Gideon kisses her before they even get to the party, unexpectedly, sweetly. Ruby has dreamed about kissing Gideon for as long as she can remember, but the kiss isn't great. Gideon is a bit sloppy but it's clear that he has a lot of experience. At the party, Ruby is the youngest person there. When Gideon introduces her to his friends, they laugh and ask if he enjoys cradle robbing. The party is full of college kids drinking and smoking; Ruby feels out of place but doesn't want to show it. As she looks around the party, she's shocked to see Noel sitting the corner with a college-aged, beautiful vampire. Ruby stands, shocked, in place, staring at them. As if he senses her there, Noel leans in and kisses the vampire passionately. Reviled, Ruby grabs Gideon and runs from the party. Overwhelmed with emotion, Ruby roughly kisses Gideon.



Chapters 11 & 12: The Wenchery of Cricket and Kim!; Secrets of the Panda Bear! Analysis

In the first Ruby Oliver book, Ruby felt the full force of her friends' betrayal when they turned their backs on her when she needed them the most. Until then, Ruby thought Cricket and Kim were her very best friends and that they could do no wrong. She never expected them to turn on her, so when it happened, she was devastated. Now that she's matured and has found real, true friends, she sees how catty and superficial Kim and Cricket truly are (and probably always were). It's unfortunate that Nora must go through an emotionally scarring experience like this, but based on Ruby's success, it's probably for the best. Clearly, Cricket and Kim aren't true, live friends. To help Nora cope with the recent hurt, Ruby pulls her into the bathroom, has her write down Kim and Cricket's name on a piece of toilet paper, and then tear them up into small pieces and flush them down the toilet. Nora is hesitant, but it's actually a liberating experience. Although it's impossible to truly flush away your sadness, flushing their names down the toilet is a symbolic way of taking back emotional control, which leads to emotional health.

At the party, it becomes clear that Ruby and Noel are broken up and they're not just having a fight. Ruby attends the party with Gideon, and Noel attends the party with this beautiful vampire. Both Ruby and Noel are specifically trying to make each other jealous, which shows that they still care about each other. Although it's unclear in the text, Noel spotted Ruby in the crowd before he kissed the vampire, and when she saw it, Ruby angrily kissed Gideon. It is interesting to note that when Ruby kisses Gideon, she doesn't really enjoy it. She has spent so long daydreaming about Gideon, but in reality, he doesn't live up to her expectation. There's a clear difference between fantasy and reality, which is a painful lesson to learn, but Ruby's realization shows that she is maturing.



Chapters 13 & 14: The Mysterious Disappearance of Kevin!; Shocking Disclosure in the Zoological Gardens!

Chapters 13 & 14: The Mysterious Disappearance of Kevin!; Shocking Disclosure in the Zoological Gardens! Summary

A few days after Halloween, Ruby wakes up and her mother is gone. There's no note and no message on the answering machine. She's just gone. Unable to deal with this change, Ruby throws herself into her new relationship with Gideon. She tries to forget everything going on with Noel and everything going on with her parents. She pretends like everything is normal. She admits to Doctor Z that she feels uncomfortable about her home life. With her mother gone, she feels fully responsible for her father's mental health. He's gone into a terrible depression, refusing to get out of bed, leave the house, or eat anything other than Cheetos. She worries that her panic attacks will return, so she's actively trying to block negative emotions from her life. Doctor Z warns that it's unhealthy for Ruby to pretend her unhappy emotions don't exist: "There's a difference between stopping an obsessive thought pattern and denying your feelings or stuffing them down" (p. 168). Ruby admits that there isn't much to be done when someone is sad. All you can do is spend time with them, trying to cheer them up, because you love them. And then she realizes she isn't sure who she's talking about: her father or Noel.

When Ruby leaves therapy, her father isn't there to pick her up as planned. She phones Meghan for a ride home and is disturbed that her father isn't there either. Hours pass and there's no sign of him, nor does he call or email. The next morning, Ruby's father still hasn't come home and Ruby begins to panic. Meghan suggests looking through his old emails, and they discover an email from Ruby's mother. Ruby phones her father's friends and is relieved to hear that her father has fallen asleep on Greg's couch. Ruby rushes over, irate with her father for abandoning her. He seems surprised that Ruby is upset: "You acted so chipper, going out with your new boyfriend and everything. I thought for once I didn't have to worry about you" (Page 176). Despite her furious anger, Ruby realizes that with all the stress in her life, she hasn't suffered a panic attack in months. Perhaps she's growing after all.

The next day, Ruby is working at the zoo when she runs into Noel's siblings, including his older brother, Claude. During their brief conversation, Claude mentions the accident in New York. When it's clear that Ruby has no idea what he's talking about, Claude tells her the whole story: When Noel was visiting him in New York, he went bike riding with Claude's boyfriend, Booth. As they were riding, a car plowed into him, killing him instantly. Noel was right behind him and watched him die. There was nothing he could have done to save him. Suddenly, everything clicks in Ruby's mind. She remembers



Noel saying that when he came home from New York he just wanted to feel happy again. She remembers the strange, bloody birthday poem he sent. She remembers his fingernails bitten bloody, his pale skin, his swollen eyes. Suddenly, it all makes sense. She longs to run to Noel and hold him close, but she doesn't think that would be fair to Gideon, and Noel probably doesn't want her around anyway. Later that week, the students receive their peer-questionnaires, and Noel has filled out Ruby's. She reads over all the wonderful things Noel has said about her - after the accident, after the fight - and knows that they are truly meant to be together. She phones Gideon that night and breaks up with him.

Chapters 13 & 14: The Mysterious Disappearance of Kevin!; Shocking Disclosure in the Zoological Gardens! Analysis

In this section, Ruby realizes she's ignoring the pain in her life. She hasn't coped well with her mother leaving, her father's depression, and breaking up with Noel. Instead of dealing with her grief, Ruby ignores how she feels, pushing her emotions to the side, hoping they disappear. In short, she is doing exactly what she is accusing Noel of doing: pretending everything is fine when it clearly isn't. Meanwhile, Ruby's parents deal with their emotions differently, with dramatic acts. Her mother leaves in the middle of the night for time to process her thoughts. Her father reacts similarly, disappearing for the night with his friend. Neither parent pretends everything is fine, and as a result, they get over their depression more quickly than Ruby does. They have an emotional meltdown and then get over it. When Elaine returns from her vacation, she seems much mellower, and the fight she previously had with her daughter has disappeared. This is somewhat of a letdown for readers. After dedicating so much space in the novel to their conflict, readers will likely be disappointed that there is no resolution. The problem simply disappears, no consequences, no apologies. Clearly, Lockhart is saving her energy for the final resolution: Ruby's relationship with Noel. After learning the truth about his experiences, neither partner can continue pretending that everything is fine. They must deal with their emotions head on, making themselves vulnerable, an act neither teen is comfortable with.



Chapters 15 - 17: Emotional Breakdown in the Parking Lot!; A Nighttime Escapade!; A Final List!

Chapters 15 - 17: Emotional Breakdown in the Parking Lot!; A Nighttime Escapade!; A Final List! Summary

At school, after Thanksgiving break, Ruby confronts Noel about the accident. Tenderly, she asks why he didn't tell her the truth. He simply says that he wants to forget about it, that he wants to be happy again. He doesn't think Ruby should be dragging up the past; it's no longer important. Ruby admits that she wants to know because Noel's omission ruined things. They had something special between them and now it's gone. If Noel wanted a girlfriend who would ignore when things were wrong and pretend everything was fine, he should have dated a bimbo. But he picked her, and he must have known that hiding something from her would be torturous. After reading what Noel wrote about her in the peer questionnaire, she thought maybe he could love her again. Maybe he still wanted to be together. The emotion of the moment is altogether too frightening for Ruby so, in classic fashion, she says what's on her mind and then runs away.

A few days later, Ruby boldly emails Noel asking for his chocolate croissant recipe. He says he will give it to her. Then later, he says he will make them himself, and that maybe he will need help. Ruby writes back, "My help with the croissants?" to which he simply responds, "Help me" (p. 212). Ruby doesn't even bother responding. She is out the door, running to Noel's house even though it's the middle of the night. She tosses tiny rocks at his bedroom window, drawing him from bed. When he sees her, he bolts to the window, opens it, leans out and kisses her hard on the mouth. When they are finished kissing, the two sit quietly under the stars. Noel cries and tells Ruby everything, all about Booth dying and how it feels to have his chest stacked with grief. In the final chapter of the novel, Ruby writes a short list explaining what happened to everyone in the novel in the months after the night under the stars.

Chapters 15 - 17: Emotional Breakdown in the Parking Lot!; A Nighttime Escapade!; A Final List! Analysis

In this final section of the novel, Ruby makes a variety of realizations about her relationships. First, she realizes that it's impossible to help someone who doesn't want to be helped: "Sometimes you just can't help people. You can only offer to help. Or say you're there if they want it. And you do that. You offer, even if it seems hopeless. Because you can't give up and do nothing. Think how you would feel if you didn't try" (p. 195). As soon as she realizes this, she realizes that she can't give up on Noel. If she loves him as much as she thinks she does, she has to be there for him, regardless of



how he pushes her away. Her efforts are rewarded when Noel simply says, "Help me." The relationship could never have rekindled if Ruby was the one putting forth all the effort. All along, she needed Noel to meet her in the middle, and now that he's asked for help, it's clear that he will return her embrace rather than push her away. The relationship is re-sparked under the starlight sky, and Ruby transitions from teen to young woman with the final act of maturity, losing her virginity to Noel. Lost virginity is a common act in coming-of-age novels as it symbolizes one of the greatest transitions into adulthood. Since this novel is written for younger readers, Ruby's sexual activity is merely hinted at and not explicitly stated in the text.

At the end of the novel, it's clear that Ruby Oliver has grown up. She graduates from high school, "graduates" from therapy with Doctor Z, sends out her college applications, and enjoys her relationship with Noel. It is interesting to note that Ruby Oliver does not have a fairy tale happy ending, which makes her story more realistic. Noel is still jealous and Ruby is still needy, but they see each other for who they really are. Their relationship isn't perfect. It's real and it's the closest thing she's ever felt to love.



Characters

Ruby Oliver

Ruby Oliver is the main character and narrator of the story. She is seventeen years old with blonde hair, glasses, and an adorable gap between her two front teeth. She describes herself as neither pretty nor ugly, but constantly questions her ability to attract boys. Ruby is on the swim team, plays lacrosse, and lives in a houseboat with her eccentric parents. Ruby's mother sometimes describes her as being self-involved and spoiled, but deep down, Ruby truly does care what people think about her, so much so that she actually suffers from panic attacks. For the most part, Ruby is a confident, attractive teenager, but when it comes to romantic relationships, she's a total mess. Ruby is neurotic and self-loathing, although her relationship with her psychiatrist, Doctor Z, is helping her "flush away" some of these negative emotions. At the opening of the novel, Ruby is thrilled about her relationship with Noel, her new, real live boyfriend. Noel calls when he says he will, picks Ruby up on time, and is a fantastic kisser. Ruby's panic attacks are under control and she feels as if she's maturing. However, all that changes when Noel returns from a traumatic trip to New York City. His behavior has changed, and Ruby is sure it has something to do with her. She reverts to all her old bad habits: self-loathing, obsessive thoughts, and flyaway temper tantrums. As the novel progresses, Ruby must learn to harness her immature behaviors and start acting like an adult, particularly when she learns the true reasons for Noel's changed attitude. At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Ruby Oliver is becoming a young woman and she's found true love in the process.

Noel DuBoise

Noel DuBoise is Ruby's "real live boyfriend." Given Ruby's track record with boys, Noel is a bit out of her comfort zone. He's described as ghostly pale, thin, and quiet. He has many unique attributes and doesn't care much what other people think of him, which is probably why he's as popular as he is. Everyone likes Noel, but he doesn't have many close friends to confide in. The person he cares most about in the world is Ruby, but something holds him back from fully connecting with her, too. Noel grew up with a very wealthy family, including a gay older brother who lives in New York. While Noel is visiting his brother in the Big Apple, he witnesses his brother's boyfriend, Booth, being run over by a car. Booth dies and there's nothing Noel can do to stop it. Noel is deeply traumatized by the event and finds himself completely unable to talk about it. When he returns home from New York, Ruby has no idea what he's been through and is angry with Noel's changed attitude. He no longer returns her calls or emails and struggles to make conversation when they're together. Fed up, Ruby breaks up with him. A few months later, Ruby learns the truth and races back to him. Finally ready to open up, Noel is able to share what's on his heart with Ruby. This change in attitude is symbolic of the teenager's maturity as they grow from children to teens to young adults.



Doctor Z

Doctor Z is Ruby's psychiatrist. Doctor Z is African-American, collects aboriginal art, and frequently asks open-ended questions, which drives Ruby nuts. Doctor Z has been Ruby's psychiatrist for two years, and took on her case in the hopes of helping Ruby understand why her relationships fail, and why she suffers from panic attacks.

Meghan Flack

Meghan Flack is Ruby's best friend. Meghan has massive sex appeal and is constantly giving Ruby advice about relationships. Although Ruby loves Meghan, she's often jealous of how easily Meghan handles men, relationships, sex, and love. Meghan is also the only other person Ruby knows who sees a shrink, but Meghan has a good reason: her dad died when she was twelve.

Greg

Greg is Ruby's father's friend from work. He's an avid gardener and a neurotic hermit. He doesn't leave the house for anything, and only eats take-away food. Ruby fears that if she starts seeing a shrink, she'll turn into a lunatic like Greg.

Nora Van Deusen

Nora Van Deusen is Ruby's ex-best friend. The two had a falling out when they had a crush on the same boy - Noel - and Ruby started dating him. Nora is 5'11" and has enormous breasts, which make her the envy of the entire school. Although Ruby and Nora had a falling out about Noel, many different factors bring them back together, from Ruby's grandmother's funeral to Nora's brother's crush on Ruby, to the catty bullies who have decided to turn their energy on Nora.

John Hutchinson (Hutch)

John Hutchinson (Hutch) is Ruby's friend currently studying in France. Generally speaking, he has no friends, is obsessed with heavy metal, and has been hired to work on the garden on Ruby's family's houseboat. It's apparent to everyone - except Ruby - that he has a crush on her, but it will never progress past friendship.

Tommy Hazard

Tommy Hazard is the imaginary boyfriend Kim and Ruby invented. For the girls, Tommy represented perfection: he never acted obnoxiously or said the wrong thing. He always called when he said he would and loved the girls perfectly. For both Ruby and Kim, Tommy Hazard represented a perfect ideal and although they shared him, they



personalized their fantasies. For years, the girls idolized Tommy Hazard and used him as a measuring stick for the boys they dated.

Gideon Van Deusen

Gideon Van Deusen is Ruby's second "real live boyfriend." Ruby has had a crush on Gideon for as long as she can remember, but it isn't until she starts dating Noel that Gideon shows an interest in her. When Ruby and Noel begin fighting, she breaks up with him and begins dating Gideon. Unfortunately, it becomes clear that Ruby is only dating Gideon to help get over the pain of losing Noel and the reality of dating Gideon isn't nearly as wonderful as her fantasy.

Claude DuBoise

Claude DuBoise is Noel's older brother. He lives in New York with his boyfriend, Booth, until the tragic accident that changes Noel's life forever.

Booth

Booth is Claude's boyfriend in New York City. While Noel is visiting, he and Booth ride bicycles through the city and Booth is accidentally killed when a car hits him. Noel is unable to save Booth's life and the accident changes him forever.

Elaine Oliver

Elaine Oliver is Ruby's mother. She is a stage performer, raw food enthusiast, and emotional diva. She often accuses her family of being unsupportive, but in truth, Elaine is the unsupportive one. She chides her husband for being in mourning too long, and fails to put her daughter's needs before her own. In a way, Ruby and Elaine have very similar character, which is likely why they bump heads so often.



Objects/Places

Panic Attacks

Panic Attacks are "episodes where a person feels a sense of massive anxiety" (p. 4). Ruby suffers from panic attacks that leave her feeling unable to breathe and as if her heart is going to beat out of her chest. These panic attacks are the reason why Ruby's parents force her to see Doctor Z.

Doctor Z's Office

Doctor Z's Office is in a blank building, like a strip mall in downtown Seattle. The office is surrounded by dermatologists and orthodontists, but the office itself isn't nearly as nondescript as Ruby expected: Doctor Z has hung African art on the walls and laid a fluffy red rug on the floor.

Tate Prep

Tate Prep is the school that Ruby and most of the other teenage characters attend. Tate Prep is for rich kids, mainly, and most of the kids have extremely wealthy parents, BMWs, and houses with hot tubs and cleaning ladies.

The B&O Coffee Shop

The B&O Coffee Shop is the choice hangout for the kids at Tate High. Ruby spends a lot of time there with her friends, and even her father on occasion. Finn Murphy works at the B&O because he needs to make money, which leads Ruby realizes that not everyone at Tate High is rich.

Polka-Dot

Polka-Dot is Ruby's giant dog. He's a Great Dane and therefore not a reasonable dog to have living on a houseboat, but that didn't stop her parents from buying him. He is however, a gorgeous dog and spotted like a Dalmatian.

Robespierre

Robespierre is Ruby's favorite pygmy goat at the local zoo where she works during the summer. Whenever Ruby is confused about something in her life, she writes a letter to Robespierre to help clear her mind.



Rabbit Fever

Rabbit Fever is the inadvertent sex mania Ruby claims to suffer from. The symptoms include sometimes visualizing people naked she would never want to see naked in real life, and thinking about sex all the time even though she's still a virgin.

Sunny Meadows

Sunny Meadows is the day camp connected to Nora Van Deusen's church. Nora works there every summer, and it's where she meets her first real live boyfriend, Happy.

New York City

New York City is the city where Claude and Booth live. When Noel is visiting his brother in the city, he witnesses the accident that kills Booth. Traumatized, Noel returns home and is unable to share what he's witnessed with anyone.

The Snappy Dragon

The Snappy Dragon is the restaurant where Ruby arranges to have Hutch's going away party. She invites her parents, Meghan, Hutch, and Noel, but Noel claims he's too jetlagged to attend. During the party, Ruby gets into a massive fight with her mother, and runs out of the restaurant when Noel unexpectedly arrives.

MeatMix

MeatMix is the make-your-own meatloaf restaurant Elaine Oliver dreams of starting. After her husband and daughter highlight the many problems a unique restaurant like this might encounter, Elaine has an emotional meltdown, accusing her family of being unsupportive.

A Roly Poly

A Roly-Poly is an unpopular student at school.



Themes

Expectations

Throughout the novel, Ruby constantly redefines her expectations and definitions for what it means to be a "real live boyfriend." At the opening of the novel, Ruby defines a real live boyfriend as a boy who calls when he says he will, picks you up for dates on time, and with whom no plans need to be formally made: of course you'll be spending the weekend together - he's your real live boyfriend. When Ruby has such a strict definition of what it means to be a "real" boyfriend, she is only setting herself up for disappointment when a day, a week, or a month passes with her partner failing to abide by her rules. As Ruby learns, expectations (without communication) are the quickest way to disappointment. She assumes that because Noel is her partner, she shouldn't have to communicate her emotions with him. Part of his role as "real live boyfriend" is to anticipate them. This expectation and lack of communication is also mirrored in Elaine's relationships, both with her husband and with her daughter. She expects her husband to get over his mother's death in a matter of days and doesn't understand when he struggles to cope. She also expects her family to support the many strange changes her behavior undergoes regardless of these changes affect their lives. As a result, Elaine's family members feel unimportant, unheard, and disrespected. Throughout the novel, many fights erupt as a result of unmet expectations. The lesson each of these characters must learn is that communication without expectation or assumption is the only way to have a healthy relationship, whether familial, romantic, or platonic. At the end of the novel, it appears both Ruby and Elaine have learned this lesson, signaling to the reader that the series has come to a close.

Emotional Support

One of the most important elements of a true friendship is support. If you are friends with someone, you should be able to call them when something has gone wrong in your day, bounce ideas past them, or sit with them during the school lunch break, etc. One of the main complaints from both Ruby and Elaine is that they feel unsupported, both in their romantic and platonic relationships. For Ruby, this is one of the key ingredients to having a "real live boyfriend" where effortless support is expected. For Elaine, the support should be unwavering and unquestioning. Unfortunately, both Ruby and Elaine lack support in their familial relationships and so it's difficult for them to find a balance in their romantic relationships. Throughout the course of the novel, both characters learn that support is not one-sided: it is a delicate balance of support from both partners. Elaine feels creatively unsupported by her husband. He pushes her to do more copywriting when she longs to be on the stage and rejects her restaurant idea as financially irresponsible. Elaine flies off the handle and leaves her husband, choosing to escape on vacation with her friends. What Elaine fails to realize is that at this particular moment in her marriage, her husband is in desperate need of emotional support. His mother has just died and he's deeply depressed. Likewise, Ruby feels emotionally



unsupported by Noel, who seems strangely distant and cool since returning home from New York. As a result, Ruby breaks off her relationship and starts a new one, not realizing that Noel is experiencing an emotional crisis and desperately needs her support. The moral of the story is that relationships are not one-sided. It takes constant communication and emotional support to achieve "real live" love.

Help

Working hand-in-hand with the theme of support is the theme of help. There are many emotionally disturbed (or confused) characters in the novel, Ruby and Noel included. What Ruby realizes is that you cannot help a person who doesn't want to change their behavior: "Sometimes you just can't help people. You can only offer to help. Or say you're there if they want it. And you do that. You offer, even if it seems hopeless. Because you can't give up and do nothing. Think how you would feel if you didn't try" (p. 195). She sees this clearly in her father's relationship to his brother, the alcoholic Hanson. Time and time again, Ruby's father reaches out to his brother, encouraging him to go to rehab to help with his addiction. He knows his brother won't get help until he's ready, but he couldn't live with himself if he didn't at least offer a hand. Likewise, Ruby wasn't able to calm and cure her panic attacks (under the guidance of Doctor Z) until she was ready to accept her psychiatrist's help. Throughout the course of this series, Doctor Z offered many coping techniques, but it wasn't until Ruby fully embraced the idea of therapy that she began to get well. When Noel returns home from New York, Ruby's grasp of love and support is truly tested. She asks Noel what is wrong, but he refuses to tell her. Rather than wait for Noel to accept her outstretched hand, Ruby moves on and begins a relationship with Gideon, even though she's still desperately in love with Noel. It isn't until Noel is ready to accept Ruby's help that the couple can move on together. When Noel is ready, he simply says, "Help me" (p. 212) and like a true friend and lover, Ruby is there to support him. It's clear that Noel truly loves and trusts Ruby or he never would have made himself vulnerable to ask for the help, which signals to the reader that the couple have reached a new level of emotional maturity and it should never be doubted that Ruby can provide the help Noel needs.



Style

Point of View

Real Live Boyfriends is recounted in the first-person and limited omniscient perspective of fifteen-year-old Ruby Oliver. The reader is very close to Ruby's emotions and thoughts, as these are the most important factors to understanding the novel as a whole. Hence the point-of-view is completely reliable. As Ruby is struggling to understand what is happening to her, she has no reason to manipulate the circumstances for her own personal gain. Due to Ruby's panic attacks, it's often difficult for her to identify her emotions in the moment, but she has no trouble reflecting on her mistakes in the text. She expresses her emotions freely in her diary, certainly more freely than she ever has out loud. This point of view is important to the novel since one of the most important themes in the novel is Ruby's emotional growth, particularly in her relationships. There could not be the dramatic impact of this growth if not for the reader's peek into Ruby's thoughts and emotions. The reader is given unprecedented access into Ruby's emotions and often, the reader understands what is happening to Ruby long before she does, which creates an interesting relationship with her character. Since the reader can identify problems early on, they support Ruby's personal success even when she is acting terribly.

Setting

This novel is set in Seattle, Washington. Most of the teenagers in this novel live in an upper crust neighborhood and almost everyone lives in the upper-middle class economic setting. The majority of the novel takes place within the walls of Tate High, the elite high school Ruby and her friends attend, but in the narration, Ruby is actually recounting major high school events while sitting in the stark office of her psychiatrist, Doctor Z. The wealthy setting of the novel distinctly sets Tate High apart from most American public schools, where funds are always a problem. It is because of this that many audience members struggle to relate to Ruby, her friends, and the setting in general. Although Ruby is living a modern high schooler's life, hers is a life of privilege that can be alienating to many readers. To balance this, Lockhart has cleverly chosen for Ruby's family to live in a small houseboat rather than a deluxe mansion. Although Ruby's parents are just as wealthy as her friends' they have chosen a quirky, artistic life. It's clear that Lockhart hopes that readers will recognize their own family problems in the cramped space and thin walls of Ruby's houseboat.

Language and Meaning

Real Live Boyfriends is told mostly through exposition in the diary-like entries Ruby records for her meetings with Doctor Z. The stark lack of dialogue highlight the isolation Ruby feels in the world and also highlights her brooding, conflicted nature. Although she



is popular, closes herself off to the outside world. Because of this, the reader's only insight into the world is through Ruby's thoughts and emotions. Absolutely everything Ruby sees in the world is somehow related back to romantic troubles, past and present, and the perils of unrequited love are reflected language of the text. Because the novel is written for teenage readers, and is formatted like a fifteen-year-old's diary, the language is very conversational, with the voice of each character ringing true to what readers would hear everyday in their high school hallways - or what they remember of their high school hallways. E. Lockhart has clearly researched the voice of her characters, which makes all the language, including Ruby's inner thoughts and dialogue completely believable. Ruby's diary entries highlight the banter of teenage girls, the way they playfully tease each other, flirt with their boyfriends, and bully their victims. The novel is clearly geared toward modern teenagers and is written in modern teen-speak. Adult readers may be confused by some of the teenage vernacular, but are given ample contextual clues to understand its meaning.

Structure

This novel is written in seventeen short chapters averaging fifteen pages in length. Each chapter has a name that refers to some action or event within the novel that foreshadows what the reader is about to read. It is interesting to note that there are two systems of narration at work in the novel although the story is narrated entirely by Ruby. On the surface, the reader is presented with the actual initial diary entries Ruby has created for her meetings with Doctor Z. As she writes, however, Ruby adds information, changes her opinions, and retraces thoughts, which is reflected in the novel's many footnotes. Although this structure can be a bit clunky and difficult to follow, once the reader gets into the flow of the writing the footnotes add humor to the text and give a deeper analysis of Ruby's thought. This structure also highlights the way Ruby has protected herself, and those around her, from her vulnerabilities, which actually proves to be the cause of her anxiety. Ruby doesn't feel secure enough to tell her story in a straight-forward way, so she tells a bit, changes her mind, and adds more honesty as she goes along. This way, Ruby feels she is avoiding the judgment and condemnation of her friends, her parents, and Doctor Z. There are also many lists, poems, parenthetical statements, and other intrusions in the straightforward text, giving a scrapbook feel to the novel. Nevertheless, the plot of the novel is simply, surrounding only Ruby's troubled relationships. The novel is quite easy to read and the plot is engrossing once the reader is immersed in the story being painted in its pages. The story line is linear with no flashbacks or long sections of back-story to contend with. The novel is quite easy to read and entertaining in its entirety.



Quotes

"You can't have an ending. It's impossible. Because unlike the movies, life goes on. You're never at the end until you die" (p. 16).

"That was it. It wasn't a real goodbye. It was so unfinished. I hate when things are unfinished. When you're not sure what people meant" (p. 29 - 30).

"Later, I would wonder, over and over, what would have happened if I'd written Noel a poem back. Or even an honestly angry note. If, instead of being fake and cheerful to cover up how hurt I was, I had been raw and true and told him everything that was in my heart" (p. 51).

"Noel was here. Noel still wanted me. I told myself I was utterly, completely happy" (p. 87).

"Believe in me. Don't listen to what people say. Don't read the writing on the walls. You, of all people. Believe in me" (p. 118).

"It's a lot easier to stop being jealous and mad when the girl who supposedly stole your guy is a heartbroken puddle of angst and everyone knows it" (p. 136).

"There's a difference between stopping an obsessive thought pattern and denying your feelings or stuffing them down" (p. 168).

"He had come home from New York wanting to be happy. Wanting me to be the happy girl who would convince him nothing bad had happened" (p. 184).

"Gideon thought I was a good person with an easy life. Maybe with him, I could be that" (p. 188).

"Sometimes you just can't help people. You can only offer to help. Or say you're there if they want it. And you do that. You offer, even if it seems hopeless. Because you can't give up and do nothing. Think how you would feel if you didn't try" (p. 195).



Topics for Discussion

By Ruby Oliver's definition, what does it mean to be a "real live boyfriend?" Why is it important for Ruby to define this term? What does it tell you about her emotional maturity before the novel even starts? In your opinion, is Noel a real live boyfriend? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare / contrast the characters of Noel and Gideon. Why do you think Ruby was attracted to each of these characters? On paper, which suitor is a better match for Ruby? Why? In the end, why do you think Ruby chooses Noel? Do you agree with her decision? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

In the novel, both Kevin (Ruby's father) and Noel lose someone close to them. How does the novel portray grief? Are either of these characters' methods of processing grief healthy? Why or why not? Based on their experiences, how does grief affect a community, not just an individual? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Throughout the novel, Ruby interviews her friends and family about love. In your opinion, which character, if any, has the best definition of love? Why do you think so? How does this definition of love relate to the many complicated relationships in the text? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What does it mean to be a good friend? How is a good boyfriend like a good friend? In your opinion, is Noel a good friend to Ruby? Is Ruby a good friend to Noel? How does Ruby's relationship with Meghan (arguably her best friend) inform her relationship with Noel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Throughout the novel, Ruby intermittently discusses her uncle, Hanson. Why is Hanson's alcoholism important to the story? What does Ruby learn about love and support through her relationship with Hanson? What do you think Ruby means when she says, "Sometimes you just can't help people. You can only offer to help. Or say you're there if they want it. And you do that. You offer, even if it seems hopeless. Because you can't give up and do nothing. Think how you would feel if you didn't try" (p. 195). Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What effect has Doctor Z had on Ruby's life? Has she given Ruby any good or useful advice? If so, what? If not, why? Do you think Doctor Z would be pleased with the end to Ruby's saga? Why or why not? In the end, does it really matter what the good doctor thinks? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.