

Reason to Breathe: The Breathing Series Study Guide

Reason to Breathe: The Breathing Series by Rebecca Donovan

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Plot Summary

"Reason to Breathe" is a young adult novel by Rebecca Donovan, which focuses on the life and events of sixteen year-old Emma Thompson, and her abuse at home.

The town of Weslyn, Connecticut, is wealthy and quiet. Emma is an excellent student who also plays three varsity sports. She is best friends with Sara, the prettiest and most popular girl in school. Emma lives with her aunt and uncle, after the death of Emma's father (her uncle's brother), and the distance of her alcoholic mother. But Emma's aunt, Carol, is a raging, angry woman, who beats Emma continuously. George ignores the problem, and is more concerned about Emma keeping her mouth shut about what goes on at home.

But at school, Emma meets a new boy named Evan Mathews, who takes an interest in her, and ultimately falls in love with her. Emma ends up falling in love with him as well. Both Evan and Sara are horrified by Emma's home life, and they want to find a way to get her help and get her to safety. But the night before a meeting with school officials, Carol murders Emma. Emma, in her final moments of life, reflects on how important love is in life, and how it helped to balance out her horrible world.



Chapters 1 - 20

Chapters 1 - 20 Summary

Chapter 1 - Emma Thomas falls asleep while doing homework, and wakes up when Jack, her younger brother, comes to get her for dinner. Emma also has an even younger brother named Leyla. Emma's aunt, Carol, talks about her hard day at work, while her husband, George, comforts her. The next morning, Emma's friend Sara McKinley picks her up for school. They attend Wesleyn High School in Wesleyn, Connecticut. Sara asks about her evening, and Emma hides the bruises on her arms. Sara is stunningly beautiful and very popular, but her looks don't go to her head. But Sara wants a boy named Jason Stark, whom she is convinced doesn't know she exists. Emma does very well in school, and is proud of her grades. Emma wonders if Jason is simply unaware that Sara wants him.

Chapter 2 - In journalism class, Emma prepares the final edition of the next day's paper for printing. She then hears a male voice she has never heard before, asking the teacher, Ms. Holt, to do an article about teenage perceptions of images. The idea is to show that everyone, regardless of their social status, is insecure about something. Emma has no idea why she has not noticed him before. He appears to be either a junior or a senior. Emma confronts him, saying an article exposing flaws would be sleazy. The boy replies that his intention is to show that everyone has more in common than they think. Ms. Holt allows the boy to go ahead and write the article, and then Emma can have final editorial say.

The boy - Evan Mathews -introduces himself. It is his first week, and he has several classes with Emma. Sara is unhappy that Emma has lashed out at Evan in such a way. After class, Evan wishes Emma good luck in the game that day.

Chapter 3 - In the locker room before the soccer game, Sara notices the bruises on Emma's arms. Emma is being scouted by colleges already. When Emma gets dropped off, Carol tells Emma that the only reason Sara is friends with her is because she feels bad for Emma. Emma secretly believes this is true. The next day, they will be attending a game, and a party afterwards -if Emma consents. Emma goes to art class. Evan is also in art class. He has an interest in photography. Emma shows Evan the photography room, and Evan asks why she never talks to anyone except Sara. Evan wonders why she doesn't talk to him, and Emma says that she's not sure she likes him. Yet Evan continues to try to get Emma to talk to him. He says it is because he thinks she is interesting. Sara later asks Emma what is going on, because she thinks something is happening between them. Emma says she can't have anyone like her because of her situation at home.

Chapter 4 - On the drive home, Sara is plotting on how to get Emma to date, on how to get around her difficult home situation. Sara explains that Emma can explain her situation, without going into full detail. For example, her aunt and uncle don't go to her



soccer games because she is so busy. Emma goes to Sara's house. Sara lives in a huge house, and is well off. Emma is given clothes by Sara to dress up in for the game. Sara's mom, Anna, is very interested in how the soccer game went the day before. Anna's husband is a judge, and they are going to be having dinner with Evan's parents because they are new in town. Sara then cuts Emma's hair, cutting it to the length of her shoulders. She also puts makeup on Emma, and Emma smiles at her reflection.

Chapter 5 - At the school stadium, Jill Patterson, and a number of other girls, compliment Emma on how wonderful she looks. While getting a hot chocolate, Emma runs into Evan, who is also going to be going to the party. Evan explains everyone thinks that Emma is very confident and uninterested in others, which is why she hangs out with the most popular girl in school. Evan also explains that he has learned from others that Emma is very good with grades, and does three varsity sports. Sara invites Jason to the party at Scott's, and because Sara only has two seats, Emma will have to drive with Evan, who offers Emma a ride. Evan drives a black BMW sports car. Emma and Evan talk. Emma is from a small town outside of Boston, while Evan is from San Francisco. His father is a lawyer who travels around for work.

Chapter 6 - Evan and Emma go to the party. They hold hands as they wind their way through the people. A boy named Ryan is happy to see Emma and Evan, and Evan explains that he and Emma came to the party together, and Ryan backs off. Emma thanks Evan for getting her out of that situation. As they head to the bonfire, a girl named Haley Spencer throws her arms around Evan, making Emma a little jealous. Evan puts his arm around Emma in response. Other guys hit on Emma, and the smell of liquor and cigarette smoke makes her feel uncomfortable, and Evan notices. Evan offers to go find Sara and get them something to drink. He returns a short while later, and Emma is standing out in the rain. Sara sees this, too. She and Emma and Evan run to her car, and Evan says good night. He almost kisses Emma. That night, Emma spends the night at Sara's house. They talk about Evan.

Chapter 7 - Emma wakes up early to go home to do chores. Sara encourages Emma to keep talking to Evan, to let him in. Emma is unsure. At home, Carol viciously beats Emma, telling her that she is a tramp, and that she found out that Emma went out the night before. As much as Emma wants to turn in Carol, she doesn't want to ruin Jack and Leyla's family. She plays soccer out back with the kids the next day. Sara is enraged over what has happened to Emma.

Chapter 8 - Emma experiences tremendous pain showering, and her face is still bruised. Sara is horrified. Emma has managed to conceal her injuries well, but not well enough not to be noticed by Sara. Emma asks Evan if it bothers him that his parents aren't always around, and he says he gets by. They talk about their future prospects, about college. Emma agrees to a date with Evan, and Evan asks her about the things she is and is not allowed to do. To do anything, school has to be involved. Passing notes in class, Evan reveals he is preparing for when there is an "us" between him and Emma. Emma cancels her date with Evan, telling him she needs to stay focused on school and her responsibilities. Evan asks if they can still hang out, and she says that they can. Emma says that they have to remain friends.



Chapter 9 - It is Friday. Sara picks Emma up for school, and asks if she will be hanging out with Evan after school before the game, and Emma says she will be. Evan and Emma have lunch together in the art room. They go to Evan's house after school. It is an historic home in the center of town. Evan decides to interview Emma for the article. He asks her what part of her body she is most insecure about. He tells her that his foot size bothers him, Emma says her lips are too big, but Evan disagrees. They play darts. Evan invites Emma to go to the batting cages with him at noon the following day. Emma agrees. They exchange iPods so Evan can download a good band for Emma.

Chapter 10 - Evan and Emma go to the soccer game. They sit with Sara. Through the game, Evan gives Emma good music to listen to on his iPod. Evan then watches as the girls' varsity team plays and wins. He congratulates Emma on a good game. Emma gets home late, and George condemns her for it, and Emma slinks into her room.

Chapter 11 - The next morning, Carol hits Emma in the stomach with an aluminum baseball bat. Emma goes with Evan to the batting cages. As Evan bats, Emma notices his muscular physique. Emma goes on to explain that her father was killed in a car crash when she was seven, and her mother died years later of illness. George, her father's brother, then took her in. Emma makes it home in plenty of time for dinner.

Chapter 12 - Weeks go by. Evan becomes a part of Emma's routine, and she enjoys it. Emma finds she enjoys sneaking out to meet Evan as well, feeling empowered. They even go rappelling. Evan can't understand why Emma's aunt and uncle won't let her go out more, and Emma tells Evan it is none of his business.

Chapter 13 - Sara remarks that Emma seems happier because of Evan. But Carol accuses Emma of sleeping around and being selfish because she is happy. Carol punches Emma several times, then follows her to her bedroom, and continues physically assaulting her. Later, Sara notices Emma's pain. Emma asks her to drop the subject. In the locker room after the game, Sara sees firsthand how battered Emma is. Sara has had enough, and intends to tell someone about what is going on -and Emma threatens her by telling her how she knows how Sara sleeps around. Emma then storms out of the locker room and asks Evan to bring her home. That night, Emma tries to hang herself.

Chapter 14 - Emma passes out, but doesn't succeed in killing herself. Evan picks Emma up the next morning. Evan tells her everything will get better, even though Emma knows he doesn't know what he's talking about. Emma and Evan go to Evan's house after school, and they hang out in his bedroom. He tries to get her to talk, but she doesn't talk right away. She falls asleep when they watch a movie. They then go to play pool. At school that week, Emma sees Evan talking to Sara, trying to understand what is wrong with Emma, but she won't tell him anything. Evan sees Emma and tries to explain, but she won't talk to him.

Chapter 15 - Lauren gives Emma a ride home the next day instead of Evan. Lauren offers to give Emma a ride home whenever she needs it. Carol hits Emma in the head for not showering before she comes home. At last, Emma talks to Evan, and says she



doesn't want to hurt him. Evan says she can't hurt him. Evan gets her to smile, and Emma is a little happier. She and Sara talk, and make up, and hug.

Chapter 16 - Sara quickly returns to her ways of plotting to get Emma and Evan to spend more time together, so Emma can be happy until college. But Sara also says that if Emma ever gets caught, Sara will not let Carol hurt her, and will go to the police. Emma accepts this. Sara decides to name her plan, "Operation Free-Em". But the plans seem to be ruined when Carol and George decide to go away for the weekend of the championship soccer game, meaning Emma will have to stay with Janet, Carol's mother. But Anna and Carl, Sara's parents, are more than happy to have Emma for the weekend, to Carol's disbelief. Sara is excited. Friday night will be a sleepover with girls from the team, and Saturday night, a party at Jake's house. Emma invites Evan. But Evan may have to attend a dinner with his parents, so he doesn't know yet. Evan invites her to the dinner, so that he can leave early, and attend the party. Emma is unsure, but agrees. Sara encourages Emma to go after Evan romantically.

Chapter 17 - The school day ends with a pep rally. Weslyn wins the championship game, and Evan hugs Emma for her amazing playing. But then Emma's mother shows up, somewhat drunk. She explains she has gotten a ride with a friend. She then leaves. Emma and Sara go to Lauren's for an after-game celebration party before the sleepover. Emma begins to wonder if her and Evan would be as good together as everyone says they would be.

Chapter 18 - Emma goes out to dinner with Evan after Sara dresses her up. Evan and Emma then meet up with Evan's parents outside the Jacobs' house. Vivian and Stuart, Evan's parents, are very happy to meet Emma. They socialize with the other guests as they move around. Evan introduces Emma to Dr. Eckel, who works at Yale, and who is very interested in what plans Emma has for college. Emma and Evan then have dinner, while a college freshman named Catherine attempts to get Evan to come and visit her at college. Evan is very disinterested, and it makes Emma want to laugh. They then leave for the party.

Chapter 19 - Emma and Evan change before they go to the party. Sara and Jason are already at Jake's house, but it doesn't look like many people are there for the party. They run into Bridgette, who is there with a guy named Rich. Emma also runs into a guy named Drew Carson. Emma realizes the party is a hook-up party. Jake comes on to Emma. Emma shoots him down. Evan has been to one of Jake's parties before, and Emma is furious that he didn't let her know about what went on at Jake's parties. Emma, Evan, Jason, and Sara go back to Sara's house. They watch a movie and all fall asleep. At two in the morning, Evan leaves, and almost kisses Emma as he does.

Chapter 20 - Emma and Sarah talk about dinner the night before. Neither can understand why Evan was at one of Jake's parties. And Sara cannot understand why Jason won't put his hands on her. Emma goes to Evan's house, and Evan's mother is thrilled to see her again, and invites her to dinner sometime. Evan takes Emma driving around on a dirt bike. Evan explains that his family and Jake's family knew one another



from years before, and that when Evan moved to Weslyn, Jake invited him to a party, which Evan didn't like.

Evan then brings Emma to see his photography studio. In the studio is Sara's white scarf, left behind in Evan's car by Emma when she borrowed it. Evan confesses he loves Emma, but Emma is horrified by the revelation.

Chapters 1 - 20 Analysis

When Rebecca Donovan's novel "Reason to Breathe" begins, Emma, as she explains it, barely exists. She lives in constant fear of her physically abusive aunt, Carol, and the uncaring nature of her uncle, George. She has to put on a brave face for her only friend, Sara, and for the others at school. Emma is a pretty girl, and does incredibly well at school - but her home life is only known to herself, and to Sara. Sara does her best to be a supportive friend, but is at a loss because she is unable to help Emma -and by and large, because Emma won't allow herself to be helped. Her plan is to keep her head down through the end of school, and move away for college. School, sports, and Sara are the order of the day. She doesn't think she needs anything else.

But the arrival of a new boy in school. Evan, changes everything. Evan takes an immediate interest in Emma, and that -coupled with a makeover from Sara - catches the attention of the school. As Emma gets closer to Evan, she realizes that she is falling for him, and she is worried that she will become distracted from her plan to survive high school. Meanwhile, Carol's beatings continue growing in savagery, and Emma is barely able to make it through the days with the amount of pain she experiences. Evan catches on quickly that there is more to Emma than meets the eye, but she won't let him in. She also underscores the point to Sara that she doesn't want anyone to know about what is going on at home. No matter how much Sara pleads with Emma to let her help, to seek help, Emma will have none of it. She is determined to handle things by herself, and keep to her plan as best she can. Yet, Evan's declaration of love to Emma changes everything.



Chapters 21 - Epilogue

Chapters 21 - Epilogue Summary

Chapter 21 - Evan says he and Emma can just be friends. Emma and Sara go to Evan's house. Evan's mother is very happy to see Emma again, and to meet Sara. Evan's older brother, Jared, is home from college. Sara is instantly attracted to Jared. The morning after Thanksgiving, Sara and Emma go on errands. They then go home and get ready for a double date with Evan and Jared. They have dinner and go see a movie. Emma and Evan hold hands the entire time. Sara questions Emma about Evan, and what she's thinking. Out in the parking lot, Sarah sees someone, and then Emma sees her, too.

Chapter 22 - Sara forces Emma to get down on the seat, and calls her Mom. She instructs Jared to go to the door to ask if the girls are home. Jared does as he is told, and then they drive around the block. Emma's aunt is in her jeep outside of Sara's house. They then sneak in, and Sara explains that her parents know Emma's aunt and uncle are horrible people, but they won't say anything. Sara gives Emma a cell phone, and has been added to their family plan. It doesn't cost anything, and Sara begs Emma to call her when she gets home to let her know everything is okay. When they go outside to drive home, Carol is waiting. She slams Emma's head into the window when they are driving back, and Emma discovers her bedroom is a mess. Carol tells George that it is Emma's fault, and George is enraged. He strikes her. Evan shows up later when Carol and George are gone, and Emma tells him to leave. Emma is grounded for several weeks.

Chapter 23 - Evan and Emma drive to school. Evan asks Emma about what is going on, but she says she can't tell him. Evan wants to know why she doesn't trust him. Emma refuses to tell him anything, and a cold distance between them begins. At lunch, Drew Carson talks to Emma, wanting a second chance with her, telling her that he isn't a normal guy, that he only went to Jake's party because he heard Emma would be there. Through the winter, Emma gets driven home by Jill, who explains that Evan went out on a date with Haley Spencer. Emma is saddened. College letters also begin arriving. Emma reluctantly gives Drew his second chance, and allows him to talk to her. Emma and Sara go to a bonfire with Drew, at which Emma kisses Drew, and Evan is enraged by it. He wants to know why Emma can't trust him, and tells her he is in love with her, still. Evan later sees Drew kiss Emma, and it hurts Emma in some way.

Chapter 24 - Carol becomes angry when colleges call the house. Carol tells Emma she is worthless. Carol beats Emma so savagely that she loses consciousness. When Emma wakes up, she flees, and calls Sara to come and get her. Sara gets Emma some ice for her back, and they go walking around the high school track to keep moving, so Emma doesn't get stiff. Sara helps Emma get changed for the game that night. Emma is determined to play. During the basketball game, she falls and blacks out. She wakes up in the hospital. Emma asks for Sara, and is informed her mother, aunt, and uncle are outside. Sara arrives. Emma must stay inactive for the next two weeks to heal. Dr. Chan



asks about her other injuries. Emma won't say anything about them. She will be spending the night. Her aunt and uncle leave. But a lot of people -including Evan and Drew -want to see Emma. Emma makes Sara promise that there will be no visitors.

Chapter 25 - Emma stays with Janet through Christmas. Janet is quiet and respectful of space. Sara comes to visit Emma to fill her in on everything she's missed. Emma tells Sara about the fight she and Evan had over the kiss with Drew. Sara tells Emma and Drew and Evan appear to hate each other, and that Evan has essentially figured out what is going on at Emma's house. Sara, meanwhile, has gone out on several dates with Jared. When Emma returns to her uncle's house, he tells her Carol is on new medication, and to stay out of her way. Emma will be allowed to stay with Sara's family as much as possible.

Chapter 26 - Back at school, Emma finds out that Evan has moved back to San Francisco. Emma is horrified. Emma believes her pushing Evan away made him want to go back. That afternoon, Drew hugs Emma, and she isn't exactly sure how she feels about Drew. Emma settles into a routine of academics and sports.

Chapter 27 - Sara tells Emma that she doesn't like her with Drew, that Emma is missing something when she is with Drew. But Sara agrees to be supportive. Emma and Drew agree to meet at Kelli's house, where the party is happening, at eight. Sara dresses Emma up for the party at Kelli's parents' beach house. Drew consents to not drinking because Emma is not drinking. The other girls are very happy to see Emma. Katie warns Emma about Drew, and Sara later tells Emma that she thinks Katie has had a thing with Drew -or might still have a thing with him. Drew's friend Jay approaches, and tries to get Emma to go surfing with Drew and the other guys. Drew sees something is wrong from Emma's face, and brings her to a cottage where he wants to talk to her. Emma explains that her conversation with other girls about dating has gotten to her.

Emma and Drew begin kissing and making out, but are interrupted by Jay. Jay has been helping Sara look for Emma. Emma and Drew go back to the party, where Jay has announced he walked in on Drew and Emma having sex. Emma is angry. Drew also appears to be having an angry conversation with Jay across the room. Later, as everyone begins heading to their rooms, Katie asks if she can talk to Drew. Drew obliges. He comes back later to say good night to Emma, and they make out again. Emma has a dream about Evan, and calls out his name in her sleep, which Sara overhears.

Chapter 28 - Rumors of Emma's sexual encounter with Drew spreads like wildfire at school, but even with Jill and the other girls helping to defend Emma, it doesn't stop the rumors. Anna and Carl, Sara's parents, arrange a college visit trip to California for both girls during spring break, which Emma's uncle reluctantly agrees to. Emma later turns down a sexual advance by Drew. She tells him she just isn't ready yet. While watching a movie together, Emma falls asleep with Drew and says Evan's name while she is asleep. Drew then leaves.



On the way back from California, Emma and Sara talk about their trip. Sara also urges Emma to make sure that Drew knows things are over between them. When Emma returns home, Carol is more happy about a surprise trip to Bermuda than anything else, so Emma gets by for a while without any beatings. Emma surmises that George hasn't told Carol about the trip to California. Back at school, the rumor is that Drew has dumped Emma for Katie.

Chapter 29 - Evan suddenly arrives back at school. They kiss, and Evan says it was worth waiting for. Evan explains that yes, he is back. He and Emma meet up again later for Evan to talk about many things. He explains that he loves her, and that he is sorry for the way that he acted. Emma stills wants him, she tells him. Evan says he was wrong to try to force the issue of what went on at Emma's house. They then go to Sara's, and fall asleep with each other while watching a movie. The next day, Emma explains to Sara that she and Evan kissed, and that they are better. Sara reveals the next weekend she and Emma will be going to New York, to meet Evan -without parents.

Chapter 30 - Before they leave for Allison Bartlett's party with Sara, Emma and Evan go for a quick walk. Evan asks about Emma's dreams and nightmares. He promises to make things up to her. Everyone at the party is amazed that Emma and Evan arrive together. All the other girls question Emma about Evan's return. Rumors spread that Drew got Katie pregnant, and Katie has had an abortion. Emma feels bad about talking about Katie, and leaves the conversation. Sara and Emma head toward the bathroom, and run into Drew. Drew is drunk, and forces Emma into the bathroom. Drew tries to force himself on Emma, but other guests at the party break the door down, and Emma is spirited out by Sara. They then head home with Evan.

Chapter 31 - When Emma gets back from New York, Carol announces that Emma's time with the McKinleys will be cut short because she isn't doing enough around the house. The coming weekend, Emma will be raking Carol's backyard, and Carol's mother's backyard. But Emma intends to sneak out. Sara tries to talk Emma out of it, but Emma cannot be swayed. Emma's mother appears at the awards evening the next night. She is very proud of her daughter. She explains she hasn't had a drink since December, and she now works for a law firm a few towns over, so she can be closer to Emma. Emma says she'll think about seeing her mother more often. Before dinner, Carol burns Emma's arm with a baking pan from the oven.

At school, Emma and Evan talk about Emma's sneaking out. They agree to meet at the park at ten o'clock. Emma sneaks out. They kiss, and talk about their plans for the following weekend, and their past. Evan says he has had sex before. Emma is a little upset, but lets it go. They watch the stars. Emma then sneaks back in and goes to sleep.

Chapter 32 - Coach Straw notices the baking pan burn on Emma's arm. Emma shrugs it off. At home, Carol has Emma unload some boxes from her Jeep. Emma trips and hurts her leg. Carol tells her she is an idiot. Evan notices Emma's limp, and Emma thinks the pain will go away, but it doesn't. She goes to the nurse, who gives her an ice bag to put the swelling down. Sara and Evan don't believe that Emma has actually tripped. Emma



sits out practice and watches Evan's baseball game. Emma cannot spend the night at Sara's the following day, for Sara's grandfather is in the hospital, and the family is going to New Hampshire.

Chapter 33 - Emma agrees to spend the following night at Evan's instead of Sara's, at Sara and Evan's insistence. Emma and Sara take their SAT tests. Emma and Evan hang out and play video games while Emma continues to ice her knee. Evan promises to take Emma away if things get bad again. Emma is set up in the guest room. Evan's parents are away, and so he gets in bed with Emma. They make out, and then Evan gets some ice for Emma's knee, and says good night. Emma realizes she loves Evan.

Chapter 34 - At home, Emma is doing the dishes, and Carol drops a knife onto her hands, cutting Emma's fingers. She refuses to tell Sara and Evan what has happened. Emma promises them she can handle things, but Evan and Sara are not so sure. Emma reveals that George and Carol are aware Emma is dating Evan, and that Evan's parents even invited them to dinner, which they declined. Sara is terrified something bad will happen.

Chapter 35 - Carol forces Emma to call Evan and cancel on dinner. Carol has put something bad in Emma's food, causing her to be sick to her stomach. The next morning, Emma is barely able to get ready for school. Evan takes care of Emma and has his mother call into school for Emma. Evan tells Emma to make sure she has her state ID, her Social Security card, and birth certificate together. Emma gets the documents from George.

Chapter 36 - Emma is beaten by Carol with a laundry softener bottle. Evan comes to pick Emma up at her house for a dinner date at Evan's, and Carol acts kind to him. Evan and Emma go to Evan's house, where Vivian and Stuart are finishing up dinner. Dinner goes very well, and afterward, Emma is shown Evan's baby pictures, much to Evan's chagrin. Emma wants to know what Evan wants to do for his birthday. At home, Carol and George lay down ground rules for dating, which Emma is forced to accept.

Chapter 37 - Emma finishes making a birthday gift for Evan. It is a handmade book of art, with special meanings and references. Evan loves it. The next night, they have a candlelit dinner at Evan's house. They agree to go to prom together. Evan buys her a necklace, which he gives to her at dinner. They dance together, listening to music from Emma's iPod. She tells him she loves him. Just as Emma and Evan are about to have sex, Jared and some of his friends show up to celebrate Evan's birthday. Emma is sad the mood is ruined, but is alright with how things turned out. She then leaves, and Sara finds the turn of events hysterical.

Chapter 38 - Carol verbally assaults Emma for her necklace. When Emma stands up to Carol, Carol becomes enraged, and Carol slams her into a glass door, causing the glass to shatter. George hears what is going on, and comes inside. Carol feigns innocence. George brings Emma to the hospital for stitches, and then brings her home.



Emma wakes up the next morning, and George has left a note for her, saying things will be different. Emma knows she can't stay there anymore, and Evan agrees to take her away the following morning. Evan will not reveal all the details to Sara, who wants to know what is going on. Suddenly, Emma is called to the school offices. Mr. Montgomery, Coach Straw, and several other teachers are waiting for her. They ask her what is going on. Emma rushes out to meet up with Sara, who agrees to bring Emma home. George is there, and convinces Emma to put off leaving until after a meeting with the school officials the following day. Emma asks Sara to tell Evan she will see him the next day.

Chapter 39 - That night, Carol viciously attacks Emma. Emma ultimately loses consciousness.

Epilogue - Emma reflects on her life. She realizes how important love was to her after all as she dies.

Chapters 21 - Epilogue Analysis

Reeling from Evan's declaration of love, Emma insists that they have to be friends. Yet, this is coupled by renewed interest on Evan's part in Emma's home life, and he begins to surmise that she is being physically abused. This causes Emma to lash out at him, and she pushes him away. Emma's mind is wholly focused on Jack and Leyla continuing to have a good childhood, and not having scandal rip apart their family. Evan, stunned by Emma's lashing out, ends up moving back to San Francisco for three months, during which time Emma enters a pseudo-relationship with Drew, who is wholly focused on having sex with Emma. The relationship does not work out, because Emma still has feelings for Evan. Evan's return to school also comes as a welcome and sudden surprise for Emma, who at last admits she wants him back.

At last, Emma begins to realize that love can be a beautiful thing, and can have a very positive impact on her life. Yet, with that love also comes concern -both from Evan and from Sara, who continue to press Emma for information about her life at home. Emma refuses to talk about her home life -still- and continues to refuse the help of her boyfriend and best friend until things become so bad that Emma must go to the hospital. The great irony is that, by then, it is too late. By the time Emma is ready to leave, Carol is not ready for things to end -and so she murders Emma. Emma, in her last few moments of life, reflects on how important love is to balance out the horrible things in the world.



Characters

Emma Emily Thomas

Emily "Emma" Thomas is the main character, principal protagonist, and narrator of the novel "Reason to Breathe" by Rebecca Donovan. Emma is a pretty and quiet girl, who, at the age of sixteen, excels in school and plays three varsity sports. She is best friends with the most attractive and popular girl at school, Sara McKinley, who is absolutely loyal and protective of Emma. At home, Emma's life is far from perfect. Besides her uncaring and cold uncle, Emma is forced to deal with repeated and savage physical abuse by her aunt, Carol. Emma keeps her mouth shut in order to make sure that Jack and Leyla don't have their childhood ruined. Emma lives with her aunt and uncle because her father is dead, and her mother is a drifting alcoholic.

Emma's plan is to excel at school, play sports, and have no social life outside of Sara -who keeps Emma's secrets. But that changes when a new boy named Evan shows up. Emma and Evan ultimately end up dating, and falling in love with one another. But as Evan gets closer to Emma, he also asks more and more questions about her home life. Sara, too, becomes even more concerned as the violence against Emma escalates. At long last, Emma accepts the offers of help from her boyfriend and best friend, but it is too late. On the night before a meeting with the school officials, Emma is murdered by Carol. In her last few moments of life, Emma reflects on how important love was to her life to balance out the bad.

Sara McKinley

Sara McKinley is the best friend and confidante of Emma Thomas. Sara is the most beautiful and popular girl at school, and she is unfailingly loyal and kind to Emma. Sara continually watches out for Emma as best she can, as does Sara's family. When Emma begins dating Evan, Sara warns Emma to be careful, but also believes it is for the best that they date, because it makes Emma happy. Sara presses Emma continually about her home life, offering help and an escape. Only when it is too late does Emma take Sara and Evan up on their offer of escape.

Evan Mathews

Evan Mathews is the new boy at Weslyn High School. He is very attractive and very kind. He takes an immediate interest in Emma, and the two end up falling in love. Evan also befriends Sara, and like Sara, he fears for Emma's life. When Emma at last consents to escaping with Evan and accepting Sara's help, it is too late.



Aunt Carol

Carol is the aunt of Emma, and husband of George. Apparently mentally imbalanced, she is on various kinds of medication, and ruthlessly and savagely beats up Emma for even the slightest offenses. Rather than have her family be torn apart by Emma, Carol opts to murder Emma in the end.

Uncle George

George is Emma's uncle, and Emma's father's brother. George is married to Carol. Because of his love of his brother, George takes Emma in. George turns a blind eye to the barbaric activities of his wife, and convinces Emma to spend one final night at the house before she leaves. It is that night that Carol murders Emma.

Rachel Thomas

Rachel Thomas is the distant, alcoholic mother of Emma, who shows up from time to time in Emma's life. During her last visit, Rachel reveals she is now clean, and has a steady job, and has moved nearby, seeking to repair her relationship with Emma.

Drew

Drew is a popular kid at school, who has the reputation of a player. He goes through girls quickly, and sets his sights on Emma when Evan is out of the picture. Emma ultimately dates Drew briefly, and breaks up with him for Evan.

Jill

Jill is a girl at Weslyn High School who plays soccer with Emma and Sara. Jill becomes a good friend to Emma, defending Emma against rumors that she slept with Drew.

Lauren

Lauren is a girl at Weslyn High School who plays soccer with Emma and Sara. Lauren is very kind and becomes a good friend to Emma, and gives her rides home from practice when needed. She is very, very talkative, and this amuses and annoys Emma.

Jared

Jared is the older brother of Evan. He is kind and athletic, and attends college in New York. Jared dates Sara briefly, but the relationship ends because he is rarely ever home from college.



Objects/Places

Connecticut

Connecticut is in the United States of America, and is the main setting of the novel.

Weslyn

Weslyn is an affluent and quiet town in the state of Connecticut. It is where Weslyn High School is located, and where Emma and Sara live with their families. It is the town to which Evan and his family move.

Weslyn High School

Weslyn High School is located in Weslyn, Connecticut. It is where Emma, Sara, Evan, Drew, and their friends attend school and play sports.

Weslyn High School Track

Weslyn High School Track is located at Weslyn High. Following one of Carol's worst beatings, Emma, and Sara walk the track, so that Emma doesn't get stiff before their game.

The McKinley House

The McKinley House is located in Weslyn, Connecticut. It is where Sara lives, and where Emma spends as much of her time as possible. It is a beautiful, warm, and inviting house.

The Mathews House

The Mathews House is an historic home in the center of town in Weslyn. It is a beautiful home, and is where Evan and his family live. It is where Emma spends the night shortly before her death.

Carol and George's House

Carol and George's house is where Emma lives. It is a scary, terrifying place for Emma, because Carol and George live there.



Book of Art

A book of art is what Emma creates for Evan for his birthday. Each piece of art has special meaning for them and their relationship together.

Newspaper

Newspapers are created and printed up by the students at Weslyn High School. The newspaper is overseen by Emma, who acts as editor.

Cell Phone

A cell phone is given by Sara to Emma for use in calling her or Evan if there is ever an emergency, and to keep in touch with them. Emma uses the cell phone on several occasions to call Evan and Sara, not just to talk, but for help.



Themes

Friendship

Friendship is a major and dominant theme in the novel "Reason to Breathe" by Rebecca Donovan. Friendship involves mutual affection, loyalty, and caring between two or more people. Friendship occurs at various places throughout the novel, but most notably between Emma and Sara. Their friendship has very positive effects on them, and also has some drawbacks as well.

In terms of positive effects, Emma's friendship with Sara means having someone to talk to about her horrible home life, about life, love, and dreams for the future. Sara is, in turn, very protective of Emma, taking care of her, and protecting the secrets of Emma's home life. It is their friendship that helps to balance out the horrible aspects of Emma's existence, and Emma later says that without Sara, she couldn't exist. Indeed, she and Sara do just about everything together, from shopping to playing sports. And Sara is unfailing in her devotion to Emma -as Emma is to her.

Friendship also has some negative effects, specifically for Sara. Sara's devotion and compassion, as well as her unfailing loyalty to Emma means that Sara will have the privilege of knowing about Emma's personal life -but will also mean that she cannot do anything about it. Sara is forced to stand by and watch day after day as Emma is brutally beaten, and Emma makes Sara promise not to say anything to anyone about it. Sara fails time and time again to get Emma to open up to someone about her experiences, to seek help, and one can only wonder what Sara is feeling after Emma's murder.

Love

Love is a major and dominant theme in Rebecca Donovan's novel, "Reason to Breathe". Love - which includes intense emotional feelings for another - occurs in the novel in two forms: romantic love, and platonic love by way of friendship. Both have profound consequences on the main character, Emma, and on the plot of the novel.

Love in a romantic sense escapes Emma for most of her life, until she meets and falls in love with Evan. Evan falls in love with Emma very quickly, seeing in her things she has never seen herself. He cares and tends to her unconditionally, and emotionally supports her through her struggles. Indeed, Evan's love for Emma is so great that he prepares to run away with her and go into hiding in order to save her from her cruel aunt and uncle. Emma admits in the end that love is what balances out the bad in life, and that she is a better person for ever having experienced love.

Platonically, at the level of friendship, love occurs between Emma and Sara. They girls aren't just friends, but they do have a love of one another, which in turn fuels and deepens their friendship. Sara takes her role as Emma's best friend to such an extent



that, even when Emma insults her and lashes out at her, Sara will not forget Emma. It is this love for Emma that inspires Sara to help Emma begin a social life, protects her from her aunt and uncle's interrogations, and to protect her personal life from others. Emma says that without Evan and Sara, she would simply not exist.

Family

Family is a major and dominant theme in the novel "Reason to Breathe" by Rebecca Donovan. Family, which includes feelings of mutual affection, loyalty, concern, care, and close bonds to members who may or may not be related by blood, can be viewed in two ways in the novel -as both a failure and a wonderfully successful thing.

In terms of the failure of family (the breakdown of the family and everything family is supposed to mean and provide), Emma must live with her aunt and uncle. But her aunt and uncle are not caring and sympathetic people. While her aunt savagely beats her up, Emma's uncle turns a blind eye to her misfortune, and makes her swear not to say anything to anyone. Emma's mother, a drifter and a drunk, is barely in the novel at all - and when she finally turns her life around, it is too late to be of any use.

In terms of the wonderful aspects of family, Emily's home life is contrasted sharply and distinctly with that of the home lives of both Evan and Sara. Both Evan and Sara have kind and loving parents, who are attentive and deeply compassionate towards them. Though they are oftentimes busy, the parents of Evan and Sara are attentive to the needs of their children. Evan's family is happy to have Emma as a part of their routine, and Sara's family is exactly the same way. Indeed, Sara's family includes Emma in all of their plans - such as a college visit to California.



Style

Point of View

Rebecca Donovan tells her novel "Reason to Breathe" from the perspective of main character and principle protagonist, Emma. The narrative is scripted in the first-person mode, allowing Emma to speak to the reader. Because the novel deals with such harrowing and deeply personal events - and these can best be communicated directly on a personal and intimate level - telling the novel in the first-person perspective works perfectly for the novel. The fact that these experiences are Emma's means that the novel is best told by Emma, making the novel that much more personal and intimate. This allows the reader to see into her mind, to see how she deals with things like pain and love, hate and joy -and gives the reader a special access that none of the other people in the novel have.

Setting

Rebecca Donovan sets her novel "Reason to Breathe" in the town of Weslyn, Connecticut, somewhere outside of New York. Weslyn is a perfect setting for the novel because Weslyn is a wealthy town that appears picture-perfect. It is this sense of security and stability, as well as beauty, that provides such a sharp contrast to the home life of Emma, which is anything but beautiful, stable, or secure. While it appears the rest of the characters have good families, Emma clearly does not have a good family. This also makes it difficult for Emma to carry on her life in public as if nothing is wrong with things at home. To Weslyans - except Evan and Sara - image means everything.

Language and Meaning

Because Rebecca Donovan tells her novel "Reason to Breathe" from the perspective of main character and principle protagonist, Emma, in the first-person perspective, it is only appropriate that the novel's language should match the character speaking. Emma is a brilliant and deeply sensitive sixteen year-old girl, who is dealing with horrendous emotional circumstances. As such, the language is quiet and straightforward, with some large words thrown in for good measure to evince Emma's intelligence. Telling the novel in such language adds greater reality and depth to the novel, and makes Emma's character all the more realistic and believable.

Structure

Rebecca Donovan divides her novel "Reason to Breathe" into thirty-nine linear and chronological chapters, with an epilogue. The focus of the novel is clearly Emma's story and her struggles, and so Donovan wastes no effort to focus the reader's attention on Emma herself. The simple and straightforward structure to the novel allows the reader



to pay attention to the plot itself, rather than the structure of the novel. While the thirty-nine chapters appear to be told in retrospect, the epilogue confirms that the novel's narrative is one of reflection, for the epilogue is itself a reflection on Emma's life, love, and life being made better for love being in it.



Quotes

"Sara, I can't have anyone interested in me. You're my only friend for a reason."
-Chapter 3, p. 29

"I don't want to be protected or looked after. I should be so much stronger than to need you or Evan Mathews to stand up for me."
-Chapter 6, p. 59

Besides, I had to focus on the present -which including surviving the wrath of Carol -so I couldn't afford to live in the past. My future was the only thing that mattered now.
-Chapter 11, p. 105

"I understand why you're doing this. I hate it -I'm not going to lie. But I'm here for you, no matter what."
-Chapter 15, p. 138

"I love that picture," he admitted softly. "I think it's because I love the girl in that picture."
-Chapter 20, p. 194

"Just think about it clearly for one minute and let me know if you want more from Evan than just a friendship. Forget about what you're feeling -think about it. Think about Carol."
-Chapter 21, p. 207

"Without you or Sara telling me, I know. So, even if you can't tell me the truth, don't lie. Don't defend them like it's okay. Because it's not."
-Chapter 29, p. 292

"If it weren't for you and Evan, I wouldn't even exist. I need more than school and sports to keep me wanting to move forward. I can't be that person anymore, not now that I know the difference."
-Chapter 31, p. 310

"Listen, I'm not going to tell you what happened. If you don't like my explanation, you can fill in the blanks as you see fit. You know where I live, and who I live with. I don't need to relive it again by telling you."
-Chapter 34, p. 338

"Love helped me live life instead of just survive it. It challenged my resolve, proving I was stronger than I ever thought possible."
-Epilogue, 377

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of friendship in the novel "Reason to Breathe" by Rebecca Donovan. What is friendship? Between Emma and which other character does friendship principally occur? What is this friendship like? What are its positive effects? What are its drawbacks? Is friendship a positive or a negative thing for both Emma and Sara? Why? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Throughout the novel, Emma assures both Evan and Sara that she can handle the things going on at home. Why does Emma say this? Is she right to say this? Why or why not? How do you think the situation may have played out had Emma gone to the authorities over her physical abuse? Why?

Discuss the theme of love in the novel "Reason to Breathe" by Rebecca Donovan. What is love? Between which characters does love occur, and in what ways? Is the appearance of love a good or a bad thing? Why? What does Emma have to say on the topic? Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

By the end of the novel, Emma has had enough of her aunt and uncle, and is ready to leave. Yet, rather than leave immediately, she decides to go home and pack, and later consents to spending the night. Why does she do this? What is her plan? What is the result of her staying at home one more night? How do you think Evan and Sara will ultimately react to news of this event?

Discuss the theme of family in the novel "Reason to Breathe" by Rebecca Donovan. What is family? In what two ways does family appear in the novel? Compare and contrast the families of Emma, Evan, and Sara. Analyzing these comparisons, is family a positive, negative, or mixed influence in the novel? Explain.