

Rules Study Guide

Rules by Cynthia Lord

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Plot Summary

Rules is the story of a twelve-year-old girl named Catherine, who is torn between caring for her autistic brother David and finding her own place in life.

Catherine's day-to-day life during one summer vacation is usually occupied by caring for David and trying her best to keep him out of trouble. To do so, Catherine has created numerous rules for David, such as "Say 'excuse me' after you burp" or "You can yell on the playground, but not during dinner." David has little sense of decorum or social conventions, and is easily upset by seemingly insignificant things. Catherine attends David's occupational therapy sessions twice a week, along with their mother.

Two significant events happen early in the summer. A new girl named Kristi moves in next door, and Catherine strikes up a unique friendship with Jason. Jason, who attends occupational therapy, is confined to a wheelchair, is physically deformed, and is unable to speak. Instead, he uses a book of word cards, pointing to cards in sequence to communicate. Catherine is at first intimidated and fearful of Jason's disability. On the other hand, Kristi is a fashionable, "cool" girl that Catherine is desperate to befriend.

Catherine, who loves drawing, draws a few word cards for Jason to put in his book, and this begins their friendship. Soon, she is drawing many cards for him, each with personally meaningful words or phrases. Meanwhile, Kristi comes over to Catherine's house, and Catherine is terrified that David will somehow ruin their blossoming friendship.

Catherine continues friendships with both Jason and Kristi. Kristi is interested in the local boy, Ryan (whom Catherine hates for ridiculing David). Kristi wants to go on a double date with Catherine to a community center dance on Saturday. Kristi sees a portrait Catherine drew of Jason in her sketchbook and asks Catherine to invite him as her date. Catherine cannot bring herself to confess that Jason is handicapped, as she fears it might jeopardize her friendship with Kristi.

Catherine continues to grow close with Jason, and in an emotional moment she races him (in his wheelchair) around the parking lot to give him a chance to feel the sensation of running. Jason invites Catherine to his birthday party, which is the same day as the dance. Catherine agrees, figuring it's a good excuse to not go to the dance and have to deal with presenting Jason as a handicapped person.

At the party, Jason hears of the dance and asks Catherine if she'd like to go. Jason senses Catherine is hesitant to accept based on his handicap, and he becomes angered. Later, Catherine matures as a person and asks Jason to go to the dance. Jason shows up, and Catherine introduces him to Kristi and Ryan. Kristi shows her true colors by being snotty about Jason, and Catherine ends up "dancing" with Jason, her true friend. In the end, Catherine has grown and has learned to find a balance between caring for David and establishing her own identity.



Pages 1 - 20

Pages 1 - 20 Summary

Twelve-year-old Catherine is experiencing the first day of her summer vacation. She is trying to get eight-year-old David to come to the car with her so they can go to David's occupational therapy appointment. David is her brother, and he is autistic. David does not want to go to therapy, and only wants to go to the video store. Catherine explains that the video store is David's favorite place. He likes to read the parental advisory information on all the videos.

Their father is set to arrive later in the day at five o'clock, but Catherine explains that sometimes their father is late, and this is confusing for David, who goes by very particular times and gets distressed if Dad is even five minutes late. Catherine further explains that David loves rules, and she has written many rules for David in her sketchbook (she also likes to draw). Some are very simple rules, like "Flush!" and "Say 'excuse me' after you burp," while others are more complicated, such as "You can yell on the playground, but not during dinner." David's autism prevents him from leading a normal life and understanding what is and is not socially acceptable.

While waiting outside, Catherine notices that a new family is moving in next door. She has heard that a girl exactly her age is moving in, and she is excited at the prospect of having a close neighbor to befriend. She expresses her ambivalence toward her brother, acknowledging that she loves him but that sometimes she wishes he was just a normal kid. David acts awkwardly around the moving people, yelling inappropriately, and then Catherine must suppress his scream when he is told he is going to occupational therapy (or OT) and not the video store.

Catherine, Mom, and David go to therapy. Catherine has been attending OT with David since he was three, and she still attends. David comes every Tuesday and Thursday to visit Stephanie, his therapist. To Catherine the various "tools" in Stephanie's office look like games and toys, but to David it is difficult work, and he often resists or screams in frustration.

Catherine wants to go shopping or go to the park during David's session, but Mom insists on staying. Catherine takes note of the regular patients in the waiting room. Among them is Jason, about fifteen, who is confined to a wheelchair. Jason's disability makes Catherine uncomfortable, and she decides she should draw Jason in her sketchbook, as drawing something has always made Catherine feel better about that subject.

Pages 1 - 20 Analysis

The reader is quickly introduced to the relationship between Catherine and David. There is little in the way of background information or plainly-stated exposition. David's



unusual behavior and various idiosyncrasies (such as carrying a red umbrella or reading all the backs of the videos at the video store) are simply presented, and only later is the reader explicitly told about David's autism. This approach helps to create interest in the reader, who immediately asks questions about why David is acting this way, and what the nature of the siblings' relationship is.

Each chapter or section is headlined with a "rule," per the title, that relates to the subject matter of the chapter or section. This section is headlined "Follow the rules," and it introduces Catherine's use of written rules that becomes a thematic consideration in the book. The rules themselves bring a specificity to the narrative, and help to provide the reader a sense of the challenge of dealing with an autistic child.

Also set up in this section is Catherine's "status quo," or her worldview/characterization at the outset of the novel which will change by the end of the novel. Like most girls her age just reaching the teenage years, Catherine is desperate to fit in, act "cool," and just be normal. David's special condition threatens this, and so Catherine is torn between loyalty to her brother and a desire to lead a more normal life.



Pages 21 - 40

Pages 21 - 40 Summary

Something is very wrong with Jason. In addition to the wheelchair, he can't speak, and he uses a tray full of flashcards with words printed on them to communicate with his mother. He also has a deformed jaw. Catherine notes that Jason seems angry today, and his mother Mrs. Morehouse is admonishing him for wanting to stop at a yard sale to buy a guitar when they would have been late to therapy.

To Catherine's horror, Mrs. Morehouse sees that Catherine is drawing her son and she scolds the girl for taking advantage of a disabled person, even though that was clearly not Catherine's intention. Catherine is mortified and apologizes.

Catherine's mother is reading a Harry Potter book to her and is at the part where Harry wears an invisibility cloak. Catherine wishes she had a similar cloak so she could disappear. Jason is taken off to his session. Catherine wonders what he wanted a guitar at a yard sale for, since he obviously can't play one. Jason returns, and Catherine's mother urges Catherine to speak to him, to explain why she was sketching him. Catherine says hello, and tells Jason she hopes he gets his guitar some day. Mrs. Morehouse confesses that Jason told her he likes Catherine's drawing of him. Catherine then gives Jason the portrait she drew.

On the car drive home, it rains, and David covers his ears, as his autism makes him extremely sensitive to sounds. Catherine recalls a school day in which a boy named Ryan Deschaine saw David covering his ears in the rain and made fun of him by mimicking him. She dislikes Ryan for his perceived cruelty.

Outside of their home, Catherine sees that the new family, the Petersons, have moved in next door, and she catches a glimpse of the daughter her age. David, meanwhile, is obsessed with the five o' clock deadline of Dad showing up. He counts down the time to the second, and Catherine knows that if Dad is a second late, there will be a scene and David will throw a tantrum. She gets David to count cars that pass as a distraction.

But sure enough, David throws a fit when it's five o' clock and Dad has not arrived. The new girl next door witnesses this fit and expresses concern, and Catherine is embarrassed by her brother. To calm him, Catherine recites lines from one of David's favorite books, Arnold Lobel's *Toad and Frog Are Friends*. They share lines from the book and it calms David down until Dad finally arrives.

Pages 21 - 40 Analysis

This section introduces Jason. The author uses several elements of his characterization to show that he is a kindred spirit with Catherine. While Catherine loves to draw, Jason wanted to get a guitar at a yard sale, showing that both have a love of art. Also, Jason



resents his mother's coddling and wants desperately to strike out on his own and have his own identity. Catherine, while in a different situation, also wants to find her own place. They are alike, but for now Catherine's fear and intimidation of Jason's handicap prevents her from friendship.

This section provides more authentic details of autism, including David's sensitivity to sound and his The author demonstrates her personal knowledge of the condition, making for a more authentic and powerful fictional presentation.

Also introduced in this section is Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad Are Friends book. Catherine and David use snippets from the book to communicate. The reference is a well-placed echo between the lasting, interdependent friendship of Frog and Toad, and a similar relationship between Catherine and David.



Pages 41 - 58

Pages 41 - 58 Summary

The next day, Catherine is waiting for an opportunity to properly introduce herself to the girl next door, but there is not a good opportunity. She attends David's therapy session again, and Mrs. Morehouse thanks Catherine on behalf of Jason for Jason's portrait. Jason flashes a "Thank You" card to Catherine. Mrs. Morehouse asks Catherine if she can be included in Jason's "communication book" or his collection of word cards, and Catherine volunteers to make the card herself and draw a picture of herself on the card. Jason makes loud screaming noises (which he can't help), but overall he seems appreciative.

Jason insists that Catherine draw him additional cards for his communication book, and Catherine agrees and takes seven blank cards. Jason goes off to his speech session, but not before slyly indicating "Stupid. Speech. Woman" to Catherine via his cards. He doesn't like his teacher.

Back at home, Catherine describes her aspiration to be a professional artist one day. Her room is full of art supplies, a calendar, sticky note reminders, things she has collected such as shells, etc. She has some unfinished drawings on the walls, like a castle and a monkey in a rainforest, and she also has three antique bottles she bought from an antique store. Catherine also keeps two guinea pigs in a cage, named Nutmeg and Cinnamon.

Catherine draws out the word cards for Jason. She uses "Drawing" and "Guinea Pig" for cards, then "Gross!" "Awesome!" and "Stinks a big one!!!" for three more, figuring Jason would appreciate a more creative way to express himself. She also draws a "Rule" card, thinking of David.

On the topic of David, he has just dropped a Barbie doll in the fish tank. He's always dropping toys in the tank, and Catherine has to fish it out. Catherine sees that the new girl next door is talking to the hated Ryan, and in her distracted state she drops the Barbie doll back into the fish tank. Some water gets on David's clothes, and before Catherine knows it, David has taken off his pants in front of the window where the new girl and Ryan can see. Catherine is embarrassed and quickly draws the shades.

Pages 41 - 58 Analysis

Jason and Catherine's relationship is further developed when Jason asks for Catherine to draw a card of herself to put into his word card album. Art and artistic sensibility is their connection, with Jason yearning to communicate with more creative modes of expression than the basic cards in his album and Catherine yearning to express herself with her drawing talent. Jason's sly indication by pointing at the cards



that he doesn't like his speech teacher gives Jason an impishness and personality that endears him to the reader.

In the next section, the author is careful to thoroughly describe Catherine's room, as the room mirrors Catherine's own characterization. The room is not fashionable or particularly well-organized, but it is comfortable, it reflects Catherine's love of drawing with many crayons and other art supplies scattered about, and it is genuine in contrast to Kristi's immaculate, fashionable and empty bedroom.

Catherine's drawing of several more cards is able to reflect her personality, with such youthful vernacular as "Stinks the big one!!!" And by crafting superlatives like "Gross!" and "Awesome!", Catherine shows that she is sensitive to Jason's need to emerge from his cocoon and express himself more creatively and forcefully.



Pages 59 - 79

Pages 59 - 79 Summary

On another day, Mom is preparing hamburgers and asks Catherine to ask the new neighbors over for lunch. Catherine dreads having David around to potentially embarrass the family, but Mom assures her that both she and Dad will watch David closely. Catherine goes outside and finds Dad playing baseball with David. Dad is throwing a ball and David is swinging and missing badly. Catherine steps over to the neighbor's house and introduces herself to Mrs. Peterson. Mrs. Peterson explains that Kristi, her twelve-year-old daughter, is at her dad's this weekend (implying the parents are divorced). At the same time, a bee lands on or near David, and David freaks out, throwing a tantrum and yelling. Catherine is embarrassed again, and quickly excuses herself from Mrs. Peterson. Mom must come to subdue David, and Mom and Dad have an argument over whether Mom is coddling David too much.

Catherine attends another session with David. She meets Jason and Mrs. Morehouse outside. While the adults have a conversation, she is able to interact with Jason. She gives him the word cards she made and explains why she came up with each one. She explains her guinea pig pets and how they behave and what they eat. She also puts headphones on Jason's ears so he can hear a rock song, which she considers a good example of the "Awesome!" card. Jason likes the music. The last card Catherine made was "Friend," and Jason states that Catherine is his friend. Catherine also shares David's rules with Jason, and explains how difficult David is to deal with sometimes. They part ways, but not before Catherine takes a large amount of blank cards from Jason's book so she can make new words for him.

The next day, Catherine spends the day coming up with new phrases for Jason's word cards, such as "Whatever," "Why Not?" "Joke," and "Watch Out!!!"

Pages 59 - 79 Analysis

Catherine's character flaws and the need for maturation and growth, are evident when she dreads having Kristi over for hamburgers because her brother might act out and embarrass her. Catherine's embarrassment is perfectly appropriate for a pre-teen sibling struggling with identity and peer pressure, lending realism to the story. However, it is also clear that Catherine's attitude is wrong and is in need of fixing, and the narrative picks up steam as Catherine's ambivalence is increasingly put to the test.

In this section, it is revealed that Kristi's parents are separated, and that Kristi must spend time between the two households. This plants the suggestion that Kristi is like Catherine—a child of two conflicting worlds—and that perhaps the two will become close friends because of this connection. Meanwhile, Jason and Catherine continue to grow close by listening to modern music together. Catherine also vents her frustrations



about David to Jason, finally having an outlet in the form of a boy close to her age who is sensitive to what she is going through.

Also of interest in this section is the more adult conflict between Mom and Dad, as revealed in the episode in which Dad is pitching baseballs to David, and David loses control of himself when a bee lands near him. It is clear that a significant part of Dad wishes he had a "normal" son he could do normal things with, like play baseball. Dad is in a sort of denial about his special needs child, insisting on pitching balls to David when David lacks the physical coordination to make any contact. Mom takes an opposite position, perhaps too closely coddling her child and shepherding him from the outside world when what he needs is more exposure to the outside world. One can't make the case that either one's perspective is right or wrong, which is the essence of the best kind of drama.



Pages 80 - 97

Pages 80 - 97 Summary

While Catherine is making cards, Mom is busy with a client for her tax preparation home business and asks Catherine to babysit David. David is being entertained with a Thomas the Tank Engine video, as he really loves trains. While David is watching, Kristi the new girl shows up and introduces herself to Catherine. Catherine is in awe of Kristi, considering her cool and fashion-conscious and dreaming about being able to brag to her friends at school that she hung out all summer with Kristi. Kristi appears as shallow and bored. Kristi explains that she thinks Ryan is nice, and Catherine keeps her negative opinion of Ryan to herself.

David bursts into Catherine's room with a cassette tape that had become unspooled. The guinea pigs start screeching, and David can't take the noise so he covers his ears. Catherine tries to apologize for her brother in front of Kristi as she respools the tape. David is amazed that Catherine is able to fix the tape, which is a recording of the Frog and Toad story. Kristi remarks that it must be tough for Catherine because "even regular little brothers are a pain," and Catherine bristles at the "regular" remark. After David comes back in yelling about toys in the fish tank, Catherine blows up and escorts David to Mom's office. Mom gets out a puzzle for David to occupy himself with.

Kristi sees a portrait of Jason in Catherine's sketchbook and Catherine tries to explain that the boy is not her boyfriend. Kristi wants to watch TV, and suggests they go to her house. Catherine is elated with the chance to get away from her difficult brother, so she goes to Kristi's and tells David he can't come.

Kristi's room is immaculate and fashionable, and nothing like the cozy mess of Catherine's room. Kristi presses Catherine about Jason, but Catherine doesn't reveal his disability. Kristi reveals she is interested in Ryan, but Catherine is not quite mature enough to like boys yet. The girls play basketball in the driveway, and when Dad arrives to introduce himself, Catherine is rude, telling Dad that he should buy a new cassette player for David and that David's unspooled tapes are not her problem.

Back at home, Catherine receives word that Jason missed her at therapy today, and that he left her a present. It's carrots, which Jason learned from Catherine is what guinea pigs eat. Catherine feeds the carrots to her pets and thinks of a way to repay Jason for the gift.

Pages 80 - 97 Analysis

A significant question generated in the first pages, "What kind of person is Kristi?" is answered when Kristi finally comes to the house and hangs out. This is another opportunity to delineate Catherine's character flaws. Kristi comes off as shallow and narcissistic, overly concerned with her appearance in a hooded sweatshirt, for one



example—and Catherine is starstruck, thinking Kristi is "cool" and just the right kind of person she should be friends with. Kristi also makes an offhand remark about David not being a "regular" little brother, setting her at odds with the understanding/tolerance that Catherine is growing into with respect to David as well as Jason.

Catherine's behavior is typical of her desperation to fit in and a certain preteen angst. She is mortified when David comes into her room yelling about an unspooled cassette tape. In this case, Catherine is manufacturing much more stress for herself than is necessary, as Kristi is not particularly put off or embarrassed by David. This is one of the lessons of the book: Catherine must learn to realize her fears about David "ruining" things are almost never justified.

Also indicative of her age and mindset, Catherine is unduly rude to her father when she and Kristi are out playing basketball, ordering him to buy a new cassette tape player to keep David quieter. This is both representative of the "my parents are uncool" phase of the preteen/teen years, and a temporary rejection of the stewardship of her brother. Immature Catherine simply wants to hang out with an artificial but "cool" friend, instead of dealing with challenging but ultimately more rewarding relationships, like the ones she has with David and Jason.



Pages 98 - 119

Pages 98 - 119 Summary

During the next therapy session, Catherine brings Nutmeg the guinea pig in her backpack to show to Jason. Jason is enthralled and pets the guinea pig, struggling to control his movements so he doesn't frighten the animal. Catherine and Jason play a game where Catherine cannot talk and they can only use Jason's word cards to communicate. They each make up a story about a man rushing past the window outside. Catherine shares her Avril Lavigne CD with Jason, and Jason makes a joke about not enjoying the music.

Back at home, Catherine comes home to see Kristi and Ryan in Kristi's front yard. She is forced to hang out with them with David. Ryan has a pack of gum and he gives some to Catherine and Kristi but not David. David feels left out and obsesses over the gum. Ryan finally gives him a gum, but he tricks him and it's just an empty wrapper without gum. David throws a tantrum, and Catherine yells at Ryan for his cruelty. Catherine finally excuses herself, and must endure the accusing eyes of Kristi and Ryan as she walks away. Catherine then yells at her mother for putting her in the situation of having to have David with her. Catherine focuses her anger in making new cards for Jason, making such cards as "Unfair," "Cruel," and "Embarrassed."

The next therapy session comes. Catherine brings her "bad" word cards to Jason but is embarrassed about them. Jason, however, insists on receiving the words. Catherine explains how the word cards reflected how she felt, and she tells Jason about the incident with Ryan and David. Jason questions her about one of her cards, "Murky," and she explains that some emotions cannot be drawn, so she drew a picture of a pond which has a muddy bottom. Jason tells Catherine (with cards) that sometimes he wishes he was dead, and that he feels incomplete. Catherine agrees to keep his feelings a secret. Catherine then explains what it feels like to run and to swim, sensations that Jason longs for.

Pages 98 - 119 Analysis

Jason's personality and mischievous spirit is further demonstrated when he makes a joke, pretending to not like the Avril Lavigne music that Catherine showed up with. He also shows his creativity by making up a fictional story about a man outside the window of the therapy building.

Whereas Jason is sensitive, fun, and inquisitive, Ryan reveals himself to be cruel and insensitive by giving David "gum" that is in fact just an empty wrapper. Catherine misplaces her anger at Ryan by yelling at her mother about not watching David, showing that she is still immature. She vents her frustrations by putting her "bad"



emotions on word cards for Jason, echoing an earlier assertion that she often uses drawing to deal with emotions.

The fact that Jason insists on seeing Catherine's bad emotion cards, which she is embarrassed about, shows the depth of their friendship. Jason is ready to accept Catherine fully and take the good with the bad. This is in contrast to Kristi, who only wishes to keep their friendship on a surface level. Jason is in fact so comfortable with Catherine that he reveals his deepest secret: that he sometimes wishes he was dead. Catherine, while urging him that life is worthwhile, agrees to keep Jason's secret, indicating that their friendship has developed in a profound manner.



Pages 120 - 140

Pages 120 - 140 Summary

Catherine jokes that she should run Jason around the parking lot in his wheelchair to simulate running, but Jason insists that she do just that. The two get permission from Mrs. Morehouse, and then head down the wheelchair ramp to the parking lot. Catherine is nervous at first, only walking fast and not running, but at Jason's insistence she begins to run very fast, to the point that Jason, at least in part, experiences the sensation of running as fast as one can. At the end when Catherine is out of breath, Jason points to his "Awesome!" card to comment on the experience. Catherine then catches her breath, and the two agree to go around the lot one more time.

Back at home, Catherine meets Dad, who is carefully gardening some tomatoes. Catherine feels that Dad sometimes cares more about his garden than his family. Catherine desperately wants to spend some time alone with her father such as a trip to Disneyland, but Dad puts taking David to the video store as a priority and Catherine feels like she is always second on the list in Dad's eyes.

Another day, Kristi comes to Catherine's door and asks if Catherine wants to do something. Catherine suggests swimming in the nearby pond. She picks out a bathing suit and chooses an ugly but "swimmable" suit instead of a flashier suit which she couldn't swim as well in. Kristi's own suit is beautiful and fashionable, and Catherine regrets not picking the flashier suit.

Catherine and Kristi travel to the pond. Kristi thinks the pond is pretty yucky, having swum only in pools and oceans before, and Catherine can tell Kristi is not having a good time. They swim to a raft in the middle of the pond and sun themselves. Catherine also is down because she was probably Kristi's second choice to hang out with, Ryan being the first choice. Kristi explains that her parents are separated and not divorced, and that she feels like she's torn in two between them. Catherine also feels torn in two, between loyalty to her brother and a need to strike out on her own. Ryan shows up at the pond, and Kristi jumps at the chance to swim over to meet him.

Pages 120 - 140 Analysis

The scene in which Catherine runs Jason around the parking lot in his wheelchair to simulate the sensation of running is perhaps the emotional climax of the novel, and a moment which represents Catherine's increasing maturation and emerging independence. Catherine realizes that perhaps the most special moments in life are shared by two interdependent people with an emotional or even spiritual connection, something she shares with Jason as well as David. Catherine is the one with the physical ability to give Jason a taste of mobility, but in that act she feels invigorated and more alive as well.



Dad's tomato garden is a symbol for his relative disconnect with his family. As Catherine states it, Dad pays more attention to his garden than he does to the emotional needs of his family, and particularly to Catherine's needs. Catherine, as the older and non-disabled daughter in a family with a special needs child, is often neglected, and Dad's own flaws are exposed when he doesn't realize her struggle.

Catherine and Kristi's trip to the pond is another opportunity to draw contrasts between the two girls. Kristi shows up in a spectacularly beautiful swimsuit while Catherine dresses in a "swimmable" but unattractive suit. Again, the inference is that Kristi is self-absorbed and shallow, whereas Catherine is a deeper, more substantive person. Additionally, Kristi hates the muck and debris of the pond, preferring the sterile cleanliness of a pool, whereas Catherine finds in the pond a certain natural beauty.



Pages 141 - 161

Pages 141 - 161 Summary

Ryan and Kristi ask Catherine if she would like to go to a dance put on by the community center Kristi volunteers for. When Catherine responds that she doesn't have anyone to go with, Kristi suggests that Jason go, who she saw a portrait of in Catherine's sketchbook. This makes Catherine quite nervous: will she be somehow compelled to bring Jason to the dance and embarrass him and herself? Catherine tells Kristi that she will think about it to stop them from talking about it. Catherine figures Kristi's reasons for wanting her to go are selfish: Kristi's mom probably said that Kristi couldn't go without another female friend.

At the next therapy session, Jason shows off a new motorized wheelchair. He can control it with a joystick so he doesn't always have to be pushed. Jason wants to take a walk with Catherine, who is fearful of being left alone with Jason in case he needed help, but nevertheless they travel into the neighborhood around the therapy building.

Catherine can see that people look at Jason with confusion or pity, and it makes her angry and embarrassed. They travel down to the wharf near the ocean. Jason says that the view is "More than. Awesome" with his cards. As they continue to travel, Catherine recognizes Kristi nearby, who is chaperoning a child as part of her volunteer work. Catherine pretends to tie her shoes to hide her face so Kristi doesn't recognize her as Catherine is embarrassed to be with Jason.

Jason points to "Pretty" on his word cards, and Catherine thinks he is commenting on the day outside, but he is really commenting on Catherine. She blushes. Jason asks her if she can attend his birthday party on Saturday, the day of Kristi's dance. Catherine says yes, figuring it's the perfect excuse to not go to the dance.

The next day, Kristi comes over and the girls draw posters for the dance together. David comes in the room, and Kristi gets the idea to teach him to dance. Kristi turns on a music CD and Kristi and David dance in their own way, with David stepping on markers on the floor. Angered, Catherine turns off the music and accuses Kristi of mocking her brother. Kristi responds that she was only letting him have fun.

Pages 141 - 161 Analysis

Ryan and Kristi press Catherine to go to the dance, presenting a dilemma for Catherine and forcing her to make a choice between being "cool" and being genuine. Catherine is torn, even despite her suspecting that Kristi only wants Catherine to go because Kristi's mother is insisting on a double date for safety reasons. That Catherine is torn despite this knowledge is indicative of her intense desire to fit in, and she is still enamored of Kristi, or at least the idea of her.



Jason getting a motorized wheelchair ratchets up the pressure on Catherine to choose between genuine friendship with Jason and fake friendship with Kristi. Now Jason can travel with Catherine, presenting an opportunity to be alone and talk at length. Catherine must now "put up or shut up" with respect to her friendship with Jason, and she in fact fails the test by being embarrassed and pretending to tie her shoe to avoid the gaze of Kristi while with Jason.

Kristi's time with David at the end of this section brings a welcome complexity to her characterization. Though shallow, she is not truly vindictive and cruel like Ryan; she invites David to dance with apparently only good intentions. Once again, Catherine overreacts about the effect David's presence has on others. Catherine has still not learned to accept David.



Pages 162 - 177

Pages 162 - 177 Summary

Catherine goes to a shop called Elliot's Antiques to get a present for Jason. She wants to get him a guitar. The shopowner has a used guitar and Catherine negotiates a good price. It's an odd shape, so the best Catherine can do to wrap it is use a trash bag. As another gift, Catherine also made several word cards for Jason that she spent extra time on, reflective of their time on the wharf. One of these cards says "Together" and it shows Catherine and Jason (without a wheelchair) on a park bench.

Catherine meets Jason at the therapist. He invites David as well as Kristi to his party as well. Catherine tells him that Kristi will be busy, and she is nervous about David coming and ruining everything, but she agrees. Catherine gives Jason his new word cards, and he frowns when he sees the "Together" card, wondering where his wheelchair is. Catherine explains that she drew him like he is in his dreams, without a wheelchair. This angers Jason and he zooms off in his wheelchair.

On Saturday, Catherine attends the party. David will come later to have a piece of cake. She meets Matt, Jason's older brother. There are several adults in attendance, and Catherine feels a little alone. Jason shows up. She gives him the "Together" card, except now Jason is in his wheelchair, and she apologizes for drawing him without one. Jason takes her to his room, and there he opens the guitar and is very pleased with it. Jason then plays a simple but touching song on an electric piano in his room.

Toward the end of the party, David shows up to eat cake, and Catherine watches him like a hawk to make sure he behaves. Jason inquires about Kristi, and when Catherine mentions the dance, Jason asks if she wants to go with him to it. When she hesitates, Jason asks if Catherine is embarrassed to be friends with him. He then zooms out of the room upset. Catherine tears up and guides her brother out of the house.

Pages 162 - 177 Analysis

Catherine gets Jason a very thoughtful gift - the kind of guitar he wanted early in the novel at a yard sale. It is worn and not the best or top of the line, like Catherine's room or her swimsuit, but because of this wear, it is somehow more genuine. It's the thought that counts with the gift, and a brand new guitar would not have been as meaningful in the world of the story.

Jason and Catherine have their first significant fight when Catherine draws Jason without his wheelchair on the "Together" card. Though an innocent mistake, the "Together" card demonstrates that Jason struggles mightily with his condition, and he does not want to entertain the folly of sugar-coating it or wishing it away. His condition is a daily reality, and his struggle is to not let his limitations define him.

When Jason asks Catherine if she would like to go to the dance, it creates a crisis for Catherine. She must now choose between difficult but true friendship and comfortable but false friendship. This is the most emotionally impactful and important event in the novel. Catherine initially falters, running out of the house in tears.



Pages 178 - 200

Pages 178 - 200 Summary

Mom asks Catherine in the car why she stormed out of Jason's house, and Catherine blames Mom for not keeping a better eye on David. Then she reveals the real reason, about her conflicted feelings toward Jason and the dance. Mom replies that just because everyone stares, it doesn't mean they are right. You have to do what you think is right.

At home, Mom drives off to see clients and Catherine babysits David by doing a puzzle with him. Later, David brings Catherine a cassette tape to respool, but the tape is cut and she can't fix it. David doesn't understand that she can't fix it and he screams and she screams back. She then regrets her yelling and apologizes to David.

Getting a second wind and determined to do what's right, Catherine calls Mrs. Morehouse and asks her to invite Jason to the dance. Catherine then calls her Dad and orders him to buy a new cassette tape of Frog and Toad on his way home, and to come pick her up to take her to the dance.

Dad does so, but he complains that Catherine disturbed him at work for a silly dance. Catherine begs Dad to realize that, while she may not have the special needs of David, she is a person who needs and wants things and who needs her father. Dad realizes the errors of his ways.

While Dad and David busy themselves with the food or T-shirts being sold, Catherine waits on the gym bleachers for Jason to show up. Just when she thinks he'll never come, he shows up with his mother. Catherine apologizes about her behavior, and confesses she was embarrassed about introducing him to Kristi and Ryan. Kristi and Ryan show up soon after, and Kristi shows her true colors by acting dismissive and distant about Jason. Catherine doesn't care, and together Jason and Catherine go to the center of the dance floor, where they dance in their own ways.

After the dance, Catherine returns home with David. Soon, David is dunking a toy in the fish tank. They communicate using lines from the Frog and Toad story, and Catherine decides to simply embrace David as he is and love him, despite his faults.

Pages 178 - 200 Analysis

After Catherine left Jason's house crying, she is at her lowest point, and there seems to be little hope (relatively speaking) for her to rectify matters in the manner we know they should be rectified. It takes a yelling match with David for Catherine to "snap out of it." In her moment of change/recognition—crucial to any such crisis/climax—Catherine realizes the errors of her ways, and she chooses Jason by inviting him to the party.



There is a strong and instant character change in Catherine, and she becomes extremely decisive and forceful. She calls Dad and practically orders him to pick her up for the dance. When Dad scoffs at the idea of being disturbed for a silly dance, Catherine pours her heart out and forces Dad to realize how he has been blind to her needs. Catherine's relationship with Dad, a subplot of the novel, is resolved in a positive fashion.

The main plot receives its resolution when Catherine introduces Jason to Kristi. She chooses Jason over Kristi and is fully comfortable about her decision. She has matured and realized what true friendship is. The final scene with David indicates that Catherine has applied her maturation to her relationship with David. She fully accepts him and his condition.



Characters

Catherine

Catherine is the protagonist of the novel. She is twelve years old and just beginning to enjoy her summer vacation from school. She has an eight-year-old brother named David, and much of her energy is expended trying to corral him and teach him how to behave in society with a set of rules she has written in the back of her sketchbook.

Catherine is very artistic, often drawing in her sketchbook with colored pencils. She finds a connection with Jason, a disabled boy at the therapy building, through the pair's shared artistic sensibility. She begins to draw word cards for Jason to carry in his album, and they strike up a friendship through this shared experience.

Catherine is desperate to have a "cool" friend and to be one of the "in" crowd, so when Kristi moves next door, she is quick to try to befriend her. At the beginning of the novel, Catherine is very self-conscious of David, and feels that David will ruin her friendships and scare away her friends. But through her friendship with Jason, Catherine learns that true friends will accept her brother for who he is, just as they will accept Catherine for who she is. Catherine ends the novel forsaking the artificial and false friendship of Kristi for the true friendship of Jason.

Jason

Jason is fifteen years old, and he attends speech therapy sessions at the same therapy building David attends with Catherine. Jason is confined to a wheelchair because of his body deformity, and he cannot speak except by pointing at flashcards contained in an album he has with him. Jason befriends Catherine by insisting that she draw new cards to put in his album.

Despite his handicap, Jason is a bright and sensitive young man, and an ideal friend for Catherine. He has a rebellious streak, hating his speech teacher for her over-enthusiastic approach, and resenting his mother for treating him like a baby. In Catherine, Jason finds a person near to his age who is sensitive to his personal and emotional struggles. At one point, Jason confesses to Catherine that he wishes he would die due to his handicap. He yearns for some sense of normalcy and to do what normal kids his age do, like play guitar, run, and have a conversation. But when Catherine draws him without his wheelchair, Jason becomes angry because he feels it is better to face his handicap than to try in vain to wish it away.

Jason confronts Catherine for her reluctance to introduce him to Kristi and Ryan, but he later accepts Catherine's invitation to go to the community center dance. It is clear by the end that Jason has formed a lasting friendship with Catherine.



David

David is eight years old and suffers from autism. He is the younger brother of Catherine. David has no sense of societal norms or expected modes of behavior, and so Catherine must constantly rein him in and try to teach him rules of proper behavior. Among his personality quirks due to autism: he is very sensitive to noise and obsessive about exact time.

Kristi

Kristi is twelve years old and a new neighbor of Catherine's who moves in next door. She dresses in the latest fashions and has a "cool" demeanor. Catherine is desperate to befriend her. She turns out to be shallow and not a good friend.

Ryan

Ryan is one of Catherine's neighbors who has the habit of cruelly taunting or imitating David, for which Catherine loathes him. Kristi thinks Ryan is cool, and she wants to hang out with him and take him to the community center dance.

Mom

Catherine's mom usually suffers through David's therapy sessions and bad behavior with patience and grace, and she provides a steady center for the family.

Dad

Catherine's Dad is a pharmacist who often works late. Catherine feels that he is neglecting the family, and particularly Catherine herself. Dad feels that Mom coddles David too much.

Mrs. Morehouse

Mrs. Morehouse is Jason's mother. Jason feels that she smothers him too much, and he yearns to break free from his mother and gain some independence.

Jason's Speech Teacher

Jason's speech teacher is bubbly and she treats Jason like a small child. Jason really resents her, and he slyly makes jokes about her to Catherine's amusement.

Stephanie

Stephanie is David's occupational therapist. She does her best to teach David useful life skills.



Objects/Places

Frog and Toad Are Friends

This book by Arnold Lobel is quoted by Catherine and David as a means to communicate and overcome the blocks put into place by David's autism.

The Community Center Dance

Catherine is invited to the dance by Kristi and Kristi asks Catherine to invite Jason along. Catherine is torn between avoiding the dance entirely, or coming to the dance with Jason and being forced to deal with Kristi's intolerance of Jason's disabilities.

Fish Tank

One of David's behaviors involves putting toys like action figures into the fish tank. By the end, Catherine learns to tolerate David's behavior because, after all, it's not hurting anyone.

Therapy Building

Twice a week, Catherine accompanies David and their mother to David's occupational therapy sessions. It is here, in the waiting room, where Catherine meets Jason.

Word Card Album

Jason cannot speak, so to communicate he points to many flash cards with words on them in an album he keeps with them.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg is the name of one of Catherine's guinea pigs. Jason buys carrots for the guinea pigs to eat as a gift, and Catherine responds by bringing Nutmeg to the therapy building to show Jason.

Pond

Catherine brings Kristi to swim in a pond near their homes. Kristi thinks the pond is icky, preferring a more sterile environment like a pool.



Secondhand Guitar

Catherine buys Jason a secondhand guitar from an antique store as his birthday gift, given Jason's love of music.

Avril Lavigne CD

Catherine and Jason share an experience by listening to an Avril Lavigne CD. Jason jokes that he doesn't like the music, but is only kidding.

Video Store

The video store is David's favorite place. He likes to read the parental advisory information on the backs of the videos.



Themes

The Value of Rules

The "Rules" of the title refers to a set of rules Catherine has written in the back of her sketchbook for David. Catherine feels that David's best hope of "normalcy" is to have explicit rules that can be easily referred to. As Catherine explains, some of these rules are very simple ("Flush the toilet") while others demonstrate more complex situations ("Yell on the playground, but don't yell at dinner"). Still others give David guidance for dealing with the stigma attached to autism, such as "When some people don't hear you, it's because they're choosing not to hear you."

One of the nice thematic concerns of the novel is that Catherine has also developed rules for herself. One important rule is "No dancing unless I'm alone in my room or it's pitch-black dark." This rule displays Catherine's shyness and her unwillingness to take chances or embarrass herself. And this fear of embarrassment is precisely what motivated her making of David's rules. In the end, Catherine must break her rule by dancing with Jason at the community center dance. By breaking the rule, Catherine shows that she is no longer motivated by the fear of embarrassment. And in the last scene, Catherine only laughs when David reminds her of the rule about no toys in the fish tank. She has learned to live with her brother's condition, and to no longer try to confine him with society's rules.

Acceptance

The main plot of rules centers on Catherine's journey from intolerance and resentment of her brother, and fear and uncomfortableness around Jason, to tolerance and acceptance. At the outset of the novel, while Catherine understands her brother's condition and is patient with him to a point, she tries unreasonably to change him (through attempts to enforce the "Rules" of the title). It is clear early on that Catherine's rules only have limited effectiveness, and often David plays by his own rules. This upsets and angers Catherine. David also embarrasses her, and she dreads being with David when he has one of his outbursts or strange episodes, particularly when the new girl next door, Kristi, comes over for a visit.

Similarly, Catherine is at first afraid and intimidated by Jason because of his paraplegia and inability to speak. In the case of Jason, Catherine finds the courage to reach out and befriend him by drawing some word cards for him. Fear gradually gives way to curiosity and finally to Catherine genuinely liking the irascible Jason. Though Catherine has a low point by one final bout of embarrassment with respect to inviting Jason to the community center dance, she makes her most important decision by inviting him to the dance in the end. She accepts Jason for who he is, and she winds up having much more fun on the dance floor than she would have if she had stuck with Kristi and Ryan.



Catherine then translates her lesson to David in the final section of the book, becoming amused rather than angry when David dumps another toy into the fish tank.

Genuine Friendship

The novel makes a contrast between the friendship of Kristi and the friendship of Jason, with Catherine stuck in the middle trying for most of the story to pick between the two. Kristi, fashionable and flippant, represents a "cool" but ultimately vacuous sort of friendship, and an unhealthy one, one in which people are manipulated and used. For example, Catherine strongly suspects that Kristi only wants Catherine to go to the dance because Kristi's mom required Kristi to have a female friend accompanying her.

On the other hand, Jason represents genuine friendship, based upon kindness and true compatibility. Catherine and Jason share many things in common, including their sense of humor, artistic sensibility, and certain frustrations that come with growing up. Jason likes Catherine for herself, calling her kind and pretty, and he has no ulterior motive for striking up the friendship.

While friendship with Kristi might ultimately be "easier," in that Catherine would not have to overcome her own fears and insecurities about disability, the "tougher" friendship is shown to be more worthwhile. Catherine makes a difficult choice at the end by choosing Jason over Kristi, but it is one that will bear fruit, as it reflects her maturation and her embrace of authenticity over superficiality.

Style

Point of View

Rules is written in the first person point of view, from Catherine's perspective. The reader is thus strongly allied with Catherine, and is able to empathize with her as she struggles to find her own identity and escape from the preteen pressures of being cool and fitting in. However, rules scattered throughout the book and at the top of each section serve to offer a more third-person omniscient commentary on the events of the novel, with certain rules having either a direct relationship to the action or an indirect and perhaps ironic relationship.

Catherine is kind, artistic, and intelligent, but she is not without her flaws. Like many children her age, she succumbs to peer pressure, and her dealings with David or Jason make her nervous, upset, or afraid, as she fears the "cool" kids, like Kristi, might think she is "uncool." Her anxiety threatens to upset her relationship with Jason, but she finds the strength to take positive steps, such as agreeing to draw his cards. Catherine undergoes a kind of roller-coaster ride with respect to finding strength at certain times and then coming up short at other times. But in the end, she matures and asks Jason to the dance, knowing full well that it might mean the end of her friendship with Kristi. Catherine also takes a journey from resenting her brother and becoming angry with him for his condition, to loving and accepting him for who he is.

Setting

The setting of rules is an unnamed small town in America in the current day (2006 when the novel was written). Though the quaint, close-knit, "slice of Americana"-type town is not named, likely author Cynthia Lord was thinking of her home state of Maine when she imagined the setting. The town lies close to the ocean, and Catherine and Jason take an important trip to a pier one day during David's occupational therapy session.

At the start of the novel, Catherine is just starting her first day of summer vacation. This is important, because it gives her time to attend her brother's occupational therapy sessions and thus meet Jason. It is also important because she is separated from her best friend, Melissa, and so she feels a bit friendless and alone at the start of vacation.

While the time period is presumably present day, there is very little indication of technology, pop culture, or other historical "markers" that might clue us in, with the exception of an Avril Lavigne CD. The author likely intentionally created a sort of "timeless" space for her universal story to take place in. The time period is important, however, with respect to the behavior of strangers around David/Jason, and the overall understanding of conditions like autism or paraplegia. While David and Jason do not suffer the outright hostility or ostracization they might have suffered even twenty-five



years ago, they are still subject to the long stares or pitying looks that Catherine truly loathes, indicating that society still has some progress to make.

Language and Meaning

The language used in *Rules* is appropriate for young readers, though the author is unafraid to occasionally challenge the reader with slightly advanced vocabulary. Catherine makes sure to explain certain specific terms that the reader may not be familiar with, such as "occupational therapy."

The lines from Arnold Lobel's book *Frog and Toad Are Friends* become an important means of communication between Catherine and David. As David's expression is limited, he frequently uses lines he memorized from his favorite book to indirectly hint at what he is thinking or wanting. Though Mom discourages Catherine from using the book lines, feeling that David should learn to communicate with his own words, Catherine has conversations with David using the book lines as a way to calm him and to reach him when other words fail.

Interestingly, Catherine uses another unusual means of communication with the other major character, Jason. Due to Jason's disability, the two often communicate by pointing at words in Jason's album. Though Catherine can speak to Jason, she sometimes stays quiet and uses the cards, which evokes a certain intimacy between the two. Their friendship blossoms because Catherine is able to arm Jason with the kind of youthful phrases his book lacks at the beginning, such as "Gross," "Awesome," and "Stinks a big one."

Structure

The story of "Rules" proceeds chronologically, beginning with Catherine's beginning of summer vacation from school. The book has an interesting way of dividing itself. Instead of traditional chapter headings or chapter numbers, each section is titled with a certain rule that Catherine has presumably written into her sketchbook. The rule then relates to the section's content in some way or makes some comment on what happens. For example, one section starting on page 76 is titled, "If you can only choose one, choose carefully." Ostensibly this rule is meant for David, but at the end of the section, Catherine decides to leave David at home and choose Kristi over David. So there is commentary, of varying degrees of subtlety, at play with the rule headings.

The "inciting incident" of the story, if we might call it that, is Catherine's agreeing to draw word cards for Jason. This begins their developing friendship, with a climax reached when Catherine must choose between Kristi and Jason at the community center dance. It is interesting that Catherine's relationship to David, and the effect that autism has on Catherine's family, is only a subplot of the main story.

Throughout the book, similar to the section headings, there are rules set apart and written in a different font. Again, these rules serve to offer commentary on the action, or help the reader to appreciate the action on a different level.



Quotes

"Sometimes I wish someone would invent a pill so David'd wake up one morning without autism, like someone waking from a long coma, and he'd say, 'Jeez, Catherine, where have I been?'" (pg. 8.)

"Sometimes I can change how I feel about something by drawing it. Drawing makes me find the curves, the shadows, the ins and outs, and the beautiful parts. I solved my hating snakes by drawing their scales, tiny and silvery, overlapping and overlapping, until all I saw was how perfect they were" (pg. 19.)

"David hears everything extra loud, Stephanie says. Milk being poured, shopping carts clanging at the grocery store, my pet guinea pigs squealing, the school bus braking as it pulls up to the corner, and the whoosh of the bus door opening—all those things and a million more make David cover his ears, fast as lightning" (pg. 29.)

"Talking to David can be like a treasure hunt. You have to look underneath the words to figure out what he's trying to say" (pg. 38.)

"In the hallway I bounce between worrying things could go wrong (what if David spills something on his shorts and takes them off in front of everyone?) and hoping things go right (the girl next door might really like me). Before I open the door, I close my eyes and wish: Just this once, let it be easy" (pg. 61.)

"I can't help checking off a list of differences in each room we pass through. No locks on the doors, no little-kid videos next to the TV, no safety plugs in the outlets, and a box of cookies left out on the kitchen table—no one worried someone will eat them all at once" (pg. 93.)

"Beside me David is asleep, his head dropped over almost to his shoulder as if trying to cover one ear. He gasps a tiny sound, wrinkling his nose, and I wonder if it's the clam flats he's smelling or if he's dreaming. But I don't even know if David does dream—he's never told me" (pg. 105-106.)

"I feel like I'm ripping in half. One half wanting to run away and be a regular person with my friends, but my other half is scared to leave David because he can't make it on his own" (pg. 118-119.)

"Watching her adjust the straps of her bikini top, I want to tell her I know how it feels to be split down the middle, too. Pulled between the regular world of school and friends, and David's world where none of the same things matter. And how I don't belong completely in either world" (pg. 135.)



"Even though we're blocking the sidewalk and people have to step on the grass to go around us, I take a blank card from my pocket and write 'more than words' across the top. Searching for something to draw, not even the ocean seems enough." (pg. 149.)

"[T]he rest of the world isn't like the clinic. Other places, people star. Or they hurry away, and I know what they're thinking. 'Oh, isn't that too bad,' or 'What's wrong with that kid?' or 'Whew, I'm glad that's not me.' I get so sick of it" (pg. 179.)

"Tomorrow I'm going to tell Mom she has a point about David needing his own words, but other things matter, too. Like sharing something small and special, just my brother and me.

Kneeling beside David, our arms touching, our faces reflect side by side, in the glass. I let that be enough" (pg. 199-200.)



Topics for Discussion

How does Kristi differ from Catherine? Describe their personality traits.

Describe three behaviors that make David different from most other people.

Why does Jason become angry when he sees that Catherine drew a "Together" word card without him in a wheelchair?

Would you feel similar to Catherine if you had a sibling with autism? Why or why not?

Describe the kind of word cards Catherine creates for Jason and his album.

How are Kristi's room and Catherine's room different? How do the rooms help to inform the reader about the girls' personalities?

Explain the role that Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad Are Friends* book plays in the narrative of *Rules*.