

Saving Francesca Study Guide

Saving Francesca by Melina Marchetta

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Plot Summary

"Saving Francesca" is the story of sixteen-year-old Francesca Spinelli's coming-of-age during a time when her mother, previously the rock of her life, is bedridden with depression. As her family falls apart around her, Francesca falls in love with an unattainable boy, makes new friends, and learns to appreciate what truly makes her unique.

The novel opens with the sorrowful line, "This morning, my mother didn't get out of bed" (Page 1). Francesca Spinelli is used to her mother's ridiculous antics waking her up in the morning, used to her mother's controlling presence in her life, used to her mother's seemingly unattainable expectations for Francesca to live as an individual at all times. Now, her mother is like a ghost, completely bedridden and practically unresponsive to the world around her. Recently, Francesca's mother transferred Francesca from St. Stella Academy to St. Sebastian's - which used to be an all boys' school - for tenth grade. At this new school, there are thirty girls to seven hundred and fifty boys. For many teenage girls, this sounds like a dream come true, but for Francesca, it's a nightmare. She misses her old friends and is forced to hangout with nerdy girls who transferred from her old school with her. As a result, Francesca feels isolated at school and wishes things in her life were different.

One of the major problems in Francesca's life is the fact that girls are treated so differently in school than boys, so some of the ex-Stella girls create a list of demands and nominate Francesca to deliver their request to the house head, a no-nonsense twelfth-year named William Trombol. Even though William is gruff and sometimes rude, Francesca slowly realizes that she's falling in love with Will, and she believes Will might have feelings for her, too. At a party one weekend, Will locks eyes with Francesca from across the room, makes a beeline toward her, and kisses her hard on the mouth. They spend the rest of the party making-out, so Francesca feels blindsided when, the next day, she learns that Will has a girlfriend. Faced with a broken heart and a mother too depressed to get out of bed, Francesca feels as if she's falling apart. Slowly, she begins to bond with her fellow ex-Stella girls and forms friendships stronger than she ever could have imagined. These three girls, Siobhan, Tina, and Justine, never question Francesca's swinging moods: they love her unconditionally, which is more than Francesca can say about her previous best friends, who abandon her in her time of need.

As the novel progresses and Francesca's mother goes from bad to worse, she is forced to lean on her new friends for strength in both her familial and social lives. She learns that being "cool" isn't the most important thing for a teenager - being surrounded by those who love and support you is. As Francesca comes out of her shell, embracing extracurricular activities like dancing and singing in the school musical, she learns to love herself and to surround herself with friends who love her for her she is, not what she represents. The more Francesca heals, the more attractive she becomes to Will Trombol, who soon breaks up with his girlfriend (although he doesn't want to date Francesca right away). Francesca learns that healing is not an overnight experience, for

herself or for her mother, but when given the space to truly be themselves, both characters express the strength and determination to survive.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

"Saving Francesca" opens with the sad line, "This morning, my mother didn't get out of bed" (Page 1). Normally, Francesca wakes to her mother blasting 70's and 80's retro music to motivate her children in the mornings, but today, something is amiss. Instead of ignoring her mother's annoying early-morning chatter, Francesca gets ready in eerie silence. She attends St. Sebastian School, which used to be an all-boys school until girls were recently allowed in. There are 30 girls to 750 boys. Although it sounds like a dream to some teenage girls, Francesca assures readers that it's horrible. When her mother made the decision to switch Francesca's school from Stella's to St. Sebastian's, she said it would be an ideal identity forming experience for her. The horrible routine of waking up in silence goes on for days. On the second morning, Francesca's father assures her that her mother is just a bit down. As she eats breakfast, Francesca thinks back on one of her parents' previous fights. Her mother, who loved to ask hypothetical questions, asked her husband, "take away your job and take away your kids and who are you, Robert" (Page 7).

At school, things aren't much better for Francesca who is struggling to find her place socially. She spends most of her time with three ex-Stella girls even though they weren't friends at their old school. Tara Finke is the consummate feminist, fighting for equal rights at the school even though the other girls find it desperately embarrassing. Siobhan Sullivan is "the school slut" and the only girl who seems to enjoy being outnumbered at St. Sebastian's. Justine Kalinsky is a band nerd Francesca never paid much attention to at Stella's, but she's forced into friendship with her here. Right now, Tara Finke has created a laundry list of female requests for the house head, William Trombol, a year twelve senior. Francesca knows William Trombol because his grandmother stole Francesca's grandmother's famous cookie recipe and now makes the cookies as if they were her own (but Francesca doesn't think William knows this). When Francesca inadvertently brings the list to the principal's office, who calls William Trombol into the meeting to discuss the demands, Francesca is forced face-to-face with the guy many girls on campus call "a sex god." Francesca doesn't see anything appealing about William Trombol, especially when he insists Trotsky wrote the book "Anna Karenina," but she barely has time to think about it because she's worried about her father cooking the meals at home and the fact that their house is a pigsty without her mom tidying everything up.

In detention that week, Francesca is forced to partner-up with Thomas Mackee, a slobby surf-dude who doesn't take anything seriously. She hopes he won't think they're friends after working on their assignments together. When she returns home, for the fourth day in a row, her mom, Mia, still hasn't gotten out of bed, despite Francesca's pleas to do the laundry and cook some food.



Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

The theme of identity is strongly introduced in this, the first section of the novel. Francesca's entire identity is intertwined with her friends at St. Stella's, so when she arrives at St. Sebastian's she has no idea who she is. This theme, of coming to terms with one's unique identity, is at the forefront of Francesca's journey. It's clear that before Mia became ill, there was a divide formed between mother and daughter. Mia, the quintessential liberal mother, has always pushed Francesca to embrace her uniqueness, much as she has done. She urges Francesca to leave her insipid friends, join a social movement, get arrested, even have sex as long as it teaches her something about herself. She fears that Francesca will become a simpering housewife, throwing her life away trying to make others happy rather than exploring the world to discover what makes her own heart sing. In a way, Mia's breakdown is directly related to her own failures to embrace what makes her happy - although this will be explored and explained much later in the novel. For now, it's important for readers to understand Mia's expectations for Francesca and Francesca's natural aversion to her mother's demands. Francesca enjoys being part of a "pack" because she knows exactly where she belongs. She is pretty and popular, leaving little more to be desired. Once Francesca is sent to St. Sebastian's, an experience her mother believes will be good for her, Francesca no longer feels as if she fits. As a result, she has shut down in classes, rarely answer questions (even though she is an excellent student) and barely engaging with her fellow classmates. At the opening of the novel, Francesca feels embarrassed that she spends her lunch breaks with Tara, Siobhan, and Justine - fellow ex-St. Stella's girls that Francesca never would have socialized with at their own school. Unfortunately for her, girlfriends are slim pickings at St. Sebastian's, so if she wants any social life at all, she must stoop down to their level.

It's important to note that at this point in Francesca's life, everyone around her is annoying or socially below her. Just as Mia suspected, she is stuck in the mindset of a popular chick who cares more about the clothes people wear than what they have to say. She judges everyone on their external appearance, including the vibe they give off (feminist, nerdy, slobby) rather than the true content of their character. As the novel progresses, the reader will see these characters clarify the vibe Francesca gives off - one of mute boredom, hopelessness, even "bitchiness," which is interesting because Francesca truly believes she is acting cool. It is especially interesting to note that Francesca rarely answers questions in class even though she is clearly bright. The first-person narration showcases her accelerated vocabulary, and she often makes advanced literary quips - like calling out William Trombol for not knowing the author of "Anna Karenina." It's immediately clear to the reader that Francesca is holding herself back for the sake of looking cool, and that as Mia suggested throughout Francesca's childhood, she is underselling her potential.



Chapters 4 - 6

Chapters 4 - 6 Summary

Occasionally, Francesca meets up with the Stella girls she used to be friends with. She always feels a sense of relief when she's with them, because she knows exactly how she fits into their clique. They immediately want to know who Francis - they call her Francis to keep her simple - is hanging out with, and then proceed to make fun of all the girls at St. Sebastian's, including Tara Fink, Siobhan Sullivan, and Justine Kalinsky. Francesca feels a strange mix of emotions - she happy to be gossiping with her girlfriends again but ashamed to be mocking her friends at St. Sebastian's. Back at school, Francesca is nominated to meet with William Trombol to discuss the list because she's the only one trustworthy enough not to lose her cool in his office. When she meets him, Francesca has a funny feeling in her stomach that she can't explain. The girls are interested in organizing a friendly game of basketball against the guys. When she presents her idea, she sees that William Trombol's hands are shaking - she's making him nervous! He agrees to the game, and they share a bit of flirtatious banter about breaking nails. When the game actually comes into fruition, Francesca feels a sense of pride and belonging, even though her team gets annihilated.

In detention, Thomas Mackee asks Francesca if she knows how to convert music notes into tabular form but she ignores him. During detention, she thinks about how Mia has always accused her of being something that she's not, giving in to peer pressure, and hiding her true desires. That night, Francesca's father takes her and her brother, Luca, out for dinner. All the kids want to talk about is their mother and her health, but Dad avoids their questions. Later, Francesca's cousin, Angelina, comes over to see if she can convince Mia to get out of bed. She doesn't succeed. Francesca is so depressed she calls her old best friend, Michaela. Michaela isn't home and her mother doesn't seem to know who Francesca is, which further depresses her. With every day that passes, Francesca feels more alienated and isolated. She no longer knows who she is, and feels like a nobody. She also begins to see how Mia's illness has affected her father and brother.

Chapters 4 - 6 Analysis

In an interesting twist, the reader sees Francesca interact with her friends from Stella's, the girls she claims are her very best friends. These girls are annoying and childish and, as Mia accused, insipid. They have a strange power over Francesca, which they obviously exploit for their own amusement (even changing Francesca's name to the more boring "Francis," just to keep her simple), yet Francesca still believes the friendships are mutual. Even though the wicked girls mock her and the other girls at St. Sebastian's, Francesca believes that the price she must pay to belong. As flawed as her friends are, Francesca truly believes they care about her, which makes it all the more shocking (to the reader as well) when Francesca calls her best friend, of many years,



Michaela, and Michaela's mother doesn't know who Francesca is. This confirms to the reader that Francesca's "friendships" are completely one-sided. While she might have been able to blow this off weeks ago, now that Francesca is truly in need of a friend, she feels completely alone.

It's interesting to note that, despite her complaints about St. Sebastian's, the only times Francesca seems to feel fulfilled are when she is at school. She even feels a sense of pride at the basketball game because she once again feels like she belongs somewhere - even if it's on the losing side. The reader sees Francesca beginning to open up to Tara, Siobhan, and Justine, however tentatively, perhaps because she has no other options at home or at school. Also in this section, the reader sees hints of a romantic relationship beginning to form between Francesca and William. Even though Francesca doesn't necessarily find Will attractive, she enjoys the control she holds over him, the ways she can make him sweat. Although she hasn't admitted it to herself yet, she also seems to appreciate the mindless flirtation, which is much easier on her emotions than contemplating the mess at home. When she is around Will, she can forget, even if it's only for a moment, that her family is falling apart.



Chapters 7 - 9

Chapters 7 - 9 Summary

Francesca's grandmother steps in when Mia hasn't gotten out of bed in a week. She decides to take Francesca home with her and send Luca to stay with his Zia Teresa. Luca cries when he hears the news, but neither child knows how to stop the rapid changes in their lives. The first night at her grandmother - Nonna's - house, Nonna walks around the bedroom, tidying up. Before she closes the door, she kisses Francesca on the head and says, "Tutto a posto," Italian for "Everything in its place" (Page 56). At school, Francesca attempts to check in on Luca but is punished for being in the elementary school area. Frustration mounts in her family life and her school life: in dance class, Mr. Ortleby insists on everyone freestyle dancing to the music he's chosen. He seems convinced that Francesca wants to dance because she sways in her seat to the music. Looking around, embarrassed, Francesca assures him that she hates dancing. His comment makes her think about her mother, who insisted that she take drama class to stop caring about what others think of her. Mia believed that Francesca's friends had taken over her life, telling her what was cool and uncool, and that Francesca had lost her identity. In detention that day, Francesca is partnered with a known bully, Jimmy Hailer, whom she snaps at for harassing a younger student. Somehow, the end up walking home together and stopping at Starbucks for a hot chocolate. They talk about their favorite movies, popular girls at school, and why, Jimmy Hailer insists, Francesca is playing dumb at school. Suddenly, Francesca pours out her heart to Jimmy. She knows she shouldn't engage with him, but she can't stop talking: "I'm vomiting out words, unable to hold them back no matter how hard I try; talking film and music and books and gossip and DVD commentaries and clothing and teachers and students and pets and brothers and loves and hates and lyrics and God and the universe and our dads" (Page 65). The only thing they don't talk about is their mothers.

On Thursday morning, Francesca joins her friends to watch the school football game. On the way, she passes William Trombol who tries to convince her to watch the cricket game instead, an idea she rejects. The St. Sebastian boys get creamed. When they walk off the pitch, bloody and thrashed, William Trombol gruffly insists, "I warned you." In debate class, the students discuss immigration and Thomas Mackee finds himself pressing the same argument as Tara Finke, which shocks and annoys him. Throughout the day, whenever Francesca passes William Trombol in the hallways, her heart picks up pace. Once, they make eye contact and he smiles at her, which nearly slays her on the spot.

Chapters 7 - 9 Analysis

Francesca's feeling of isolation and invisibility continues when her family makes major life decisions without discussing them with her first. Francesca's frustrations begin when her father continues refusing to answer any of her questions about Mia's condition. She



feels as if her father is treating her like a child, as if she is unable to handle the emotional trauma of the truth. As a result, she feels invisible and unwanted. This feeling escalates when Nonna arrives and separates Francesca from Luca, the one family member Francesca feels she can count on. Nonna believes that Luca will be better off with his same-aged cousins, and that Francesca would prefer studying in a quiet house not overrun by children. The only problem is that no one consulted either child before making the decision. In fact, Francesca and Luca DON'T want to be separated, they don't want to fracture their family any further, but as usual, Francesca's "invisibility" prevents her from voicing her true opinion. This is not only a problem at home; it's also a problem at school. Mr. Ortle, the drama teacher, recognizes Francesca's creative spirit even before she sees it in herself. Francesca adamantly denies liking to dance, but subconsciously, she's dancing in the aisles. As the novel progresses, the reader will see how Francesca's friends at Stella have stifled any unique or creative aspects of her character as they tried to mold her into the "perfect friend." Mia's fears that these zombie-like friends have sucked the soul from her daughter are totally substantiated as Francesca slowly begins to realize her lost passions (one of which, which will come at no surprise to the reader, is dancing).

Two of Francesca's internal struggles begin to take shape in this section. First, Francesca begins to realize that friends can be formed in unexpected places - such as her fledgling friendship with Jimmy Hailer, the school bully. For some strange reason, Francesca finds herself "vomiting out words" to this boy she barely knows, highlighting for the reader her desperate desire not to be alone anymore. Jimmy happened to be in the right place at the right time, however unexpected, and Francesca realizes that she may have a tendency of judging people too harshly. A day before, and perhaps even an hour before, Francesca never would have imagined sharing a drink with Jimmy Hailer, and now suddenly, they are bonding. It's interesting to note the one topic they don't talk about is their mothers. Francesca isn't emotionally ready to uncover that wound, and it's possible that Jimmy Hailer is nursing his own motherly wound. Also in this section, Francesca is clearly beginning to crush on William Trombol. The reason for her sudden attraction isn't really explained, but the conflict is clear: how can she fall in love when her family is falling apart? This struggle for balance (which parallels Mia's struggle for balance) will form the crux of this novel.



Chapters 10 - 12

Chapters 10 - 12 Summary

In History class, Thomas Mackee spends the entire hour pouring over a music sheet he's trying to decode into tabular. Annoyed, Francesca grabs the sheet music and passes it to Justine Kalinsky, who deciphers it in less than ten minutes. He grunts his thanks. On the bus on the way home, Justine and Francesca sit together. When the bus next stops, Michaela and Natalia, two of Francesca's Stella friends, board the bus and come rushing toward her. They shriek and babble with gossip about the upcoming party - one that Francesca hasn't been invited to. Francesca is shocked when Tina, her arch-enemy and Stella's, joins her friends in their conversation. When she confronts Michaela about why she's hanging out with Tina, Michaela rolls her eyes and says that Tina was only mean to Francesca and that she shouldn't take it personally. Angry and confused, Francesca gets off at the next bus stop with Justine and falls into step beside her. Even though they aren't really friends, Justine has enough social graces not to question why Francesca is following her home. Finally, she breaks the silence by asking if everything is okay. She says she's seen a big change in Francesca from when they were younger, when Francesca used to sing out loud in choir and dance in the hallways. Now she seems too self-conscious to have fun. Suddenly, Justine leaps behind a tree, dragging Francesca with her. Justine's crush, whom she only refers to as "the tuba guy" ambles past while Justine blushes furiously.

A few days later, Nonna holds rosary at her house and invites all the other Catholic, Italian grandmothers over to pray. Each woman brings a dish to pass, including William Trombol's grandmother who brings the stolen "S" biscuits. While the old ladies are praying, Francesca throws out the biscuits to save Nonna's pride. Half an hour later, the doorbell rings, and Francesca is shocked (and embarrassed because she's wearing her pajamas) to see William Trombol there to pick up his grandmother. They sit on the front steps together, laughing and flirting, which surprises Francesca greatly. At school the next day, teachers seem to be giving Francesca an easier time, and one even asks if she'd like to lie down in the nurse's office. The nurse knows all about Francesca's mother, which leads her to believe that Luca had been earlier that day. The nurse confides that William Trombol told her about Mia's illness and the impact it was having on Francesca. She isn't sure whether to feel offended, embarrassed, or relieved.

Chapters 10 - 12 Analysis

Most readers won't need another example of Francesca's Stella friends' wicked behavior for proof that they are terrible friends, but Marchetta adds this bus scene for good measure. Not only do the girls openly make fun of the ex-Stella girls (like Justine) while Justine is within earshot, they refuse to acknowledge Justine's presence, superficially ask about Francesca's mother (while looking over her shoulder to see if there's anyone better to talk to), and blab on about a party they're attending (even



though it's common courtesy not to talk about a party in front of someone who hasn't been invited) rather than supporting Francesca in her emotional time of need. All of these behaviors show how selfish, immature, catty, and superficial Francesca's "friends" are. Had she not broken away from their clique by joining a new school, Francesca would have run the risk of turning out just like them, a thought that horrified Mia. On top of everything, the Stella girls are now best buddies with Tina, Francesca's arch-enemy from her old school. Tina had ruthlessly taunted and bullied Francesca, yet her "friends" felt no allegiance to protect her. They don't understand why Francesca is bothered that they've befriended her, after all, Tina was never mean to THEM. Whereas in the previous sections, Francesca took her mistreatment silently, this section is the first time she questions the value of her friendships. She can't pinpoint her emotions, but she knows she needs to get away from the Stella girls right away.

Unintentionally, Francesca ends up walking home with Justine (a socially horrifying thought). Justine is the first person to ask Francesca if she's alright. Like the Stella girls, Justine has known Francesca her whole life, and can remember the wild, spirited girl Francesca had been before joining with her group of popular "friends." Before she was an elite Stella's girl, Francesca had loved music, drama, and dancing - three things she claims to hate now. Justine acknowledges the sharp transition Francesca underwent, highlighting the same fears that Mia voiced. Before Francesca can be offended, Justine drags her into the shadows when her crush walks by. This innocent act of girlish embarrassment - not wanting to make eye contact with a handsome boy - immediately forms a bond between the two girls. In a split second, Francesca once again feels like she belongs, that she has a friend, that she can laugh and feel silly. Francesca also begins to open herself up to Will. Both Will and Justine show sincere concern for Francesca's well-being, alerting teachers, nurses, and friends to her family troubles. Although it could be interpreted as meddling, Will and Justine's involvement is much needed because everyone else in Francesca's life, particularly her father, are still in denial about the truth.



Chapters 13 - 15

Chapters 13 - 15 Summary

Francesca is invited to a party and decides to attend with Siobhan and Justine. Tara isn't interested because she'd rather spend her time organizing her next political campaign. By the time Francesca arrives, everyone is wasted, including William Trombol. William sees her from the other side of the room, walks straight toward her, and kisses her hard on the mouth. Francesca is shocked but eagerly kisses him back. They spend the rest of the party kissing wildly, and Francesca notices Will's arms shaking. She pulls away from him, says, "Do that sober and I'll be impressed," and then walks away (Page 99). Over the weekend, Francesca thinks about Will a thousand times a day, praying that he'll call and ask her out. On Monday, she decides that she's going to ask Will out; why wait for what she wants? He obviously likes her too or he wouldn't have kissed her that way. Before she can find Will, however, Justine pulls her aside and quietly announces that William Trombol has a girlfriend. Everyone who saw Francesca and William kissing is talking about it, which makes Francesca feel like dirt. Suddenly, she goes from wanting to ask William out to hoping she never sees him again. Excusing herself to go to the bathroom, Francesca sneaks over to the elementary side of school to find Luca. They sit in the library, embracing each other, weeping. Thomas Mackee walks by but doesn't tease them, which Francesca is grateful for. That night, Tara, Justine, and Siobhan throw Francesca a boy bashing party where they listen to angry music and watch sappy films.

A few days later, Dad arrives to visit Francesca at Nonna's house. She's been there for almost a month and nothing has changed at home. Dad has decided to bring normalcy back to the house, and Francesca is only too happy to return home. The three of them - Dad, Francesca, and Luca - sit at the table and organize their schedules to manage the household while Mia is recovering. Everything seems to be going to plan until Dad attempts to do the grocery shopping. He comes home with bags full of junk food that Mia never would have purchased. When Francesca complains, Dad deflates like he doesn't have the energy to manage this alone. At school, Francesca does her best to avoid William, but he seeks her out in the hallway. He seems flustered and agitated, saying that he hadn't "planned" Francesca. Francesca won't let him apologize and won't hear him out. She snaps at him and then proudly walks away. The next day in drama class, Mr. Ortleby is still trying to convince the class to dance. For no apparent reason, Thomas Mackee suddenly stands up from his seat and starts grooving to the music. He dances wildly, hilariously, and pulls Francesca up to join him. This time, she doesn't object. She lets the music take over as she laughs harder than she has in weeks. When Thomas begins to tire, Francesca pulls Siobhan up with her and they laugh like old friends.



Chapters 13 - 15 Analysis

When William kisses Francesca at the party, something shifts in her reality. First, she realizes that she doesn't want to be a drunken score at a party, which is why she tells him "do that sober." Second, she realizes that she really likes William, a realization that had been hinted at but never fully revealed. Thirdly, she realizes that William actually likes her - enough that his arms shake with excitement when he embraces her. Some readers might find the sudden make-out session shocking, but Francesca clearly feels out of control. Her mother is ill, her father is distressed, her family is falling apart. William is the first person to reach out and embrace her (however inappropriately) and that must have felt good. Yet the exciting new dream is too good to be true. Once again, Francesca feels victimized and wild when it is revealed that William already has a girlfriend. It's interesting to note that immediately afterward, Francesca lets loose in her theatre class, appropriately acting out her wildness, her desperate need to be a footloose teenager in this stifling, stressful world. It's no surprise that Thomas Mackee, who saw Francesca weeping with Luca in the hallway, led the impromptu dance party: he saw that Francesca needed a release, so he provided the perfect opportunity for her to let go. When Francesca first begins to fret about William after the party, she still clings to advice from her old friends, yet in her moment of revelation in theatre class, she reaches for Siobhan, dancing and giggling with her. This highlights the slow change Francesca undergoes as she transitions into her new, self-sufficient skin.



Chapters 16 - 18

Chapters 16 - 18 Summary

That afternoon, Francesca finds herself alone at the bus stop with Thomas Mackee. When the bus driver doesn't stop, they walk home together, talking about their dancing outburst. Shocking herself, Francesca thinks, "For a moment I can't help thinking how decent he is; that there's some hope for him beyond the obnoxious image he displays" (Page 119). At home, Francesca has been spending her afternoons phoning Mia's colleagues at the college to let them know about her condition. One of her colleagues, a gruff, no nonsense woman, stops by to check on Mia herself. She asks Francesca a million questions, seeming to blame her for the fact that Mia hasn't seen a doctor yet and hasn't been prescribed antidepressants. Desperate to reach her mother again, Francesca makes her a plate of toast and brings it to her room. Even though Mia hasn't eaten in days, Francesca lays in bed next to her, the plate of toast between them. She tells Mia all about her struggles at school, William Trombol, the kiss, and all the gossip. When she finishes speaking, she takes away the toast tray and to her surprise, finds that it's empty.

On the bus the next day, Tara, Siobhan, Justine, and Francesca are arguing amongst themselves. Fed up with their bickering, Thomas Mackee stands up and says, "You know what we call you? Bitch Spice, Butch Spice, Slut Spice, and Stupid Spice" (Page 124). The girls spend the rest of the day obsessing over which girl is which "spice." That afternoon, as Francesca walks home with Jimmy Hailler, he says that she's all four: "You're constantly bitching things under your breath, you come across bloody stupid because you don't speak, on a particular angle in the that uniform on an overcast day with your hair up, you've got that stocky butch thing happening, plus you're pushing other girl's boyfriends which makes you a slut" (Page 126). Jimmy follows Francesca all the way home, and when he doesn't leave, she feels as if she must invite him in. She orders him to sit down and stay put as she checks on her mother, but he follows her straight into Mia's bedroom where he introduces himself. Francesca is shocked to see that the pair get on like a house on fire. At school, things are starting to change as well. Morning bus rides aren't nearly as lonely with Tara, Justine, Siobhan, and Thomas Mackee to keep her company. Luca laughs when Thomas teases him, and Tara succeeds in tricking Thomas into joining a protest with her.

Chapters 16 - 18 Analysis

Despite Francesca's slow transition into normalcy at school, she is still expected to undertake very adult chores at home, including phoning all of Mia's colleagues to let them know about her breakdown. This is an interesting task for a teenager, not only because Francesca is forced to admit (to herself and others) that her mother is ill, but also because she is forced to use an adult vocabulary and handle adult emotions when all she wants to do is crawl into her mother's arms and weep. This transition is an



important milestone in coming-of-age novels: the protagonist must always undertake an adult task, leaving their childish ideals behind as they trudge forward into the future. When Mia's colleague comes to visit and makes accusatory comments about her care, she chides Francesca saying, "You and your brother have got to stop thinking she's there to be everything to you" (Page 120). At the time, all Francesca can think is that she's Mia's daughter, of course her mother means (and is) everything to her, but as the novel progresses, Francesca begins to realize that like herself, her mother needs her own identity. Mia needs to define herself away from her family and their external expectations, just as Francesca learns (on a much smaller scale) to self identify away from the expectations of her St. Stella's friends.

It's interesting to note that Francesca finally opens up to her mother about William, the kiss, and her new friends at school. This discussion is the first time in a long time that Mia has eaten food: she did so mindlessly, engrossed in Francesca's conversation. This shows the reader that Mia has hope for recovery. It must have been exhausting for her to constantly obsess about her breakdown. The moment someone begins to treat her "normally," she begins to heal. The same goes for Francesca: she doesn't heal during the long discussions about her mother or the weeping sessions in the hallway. While they're helpful and cathartic, the real healing comes in the moments of laughter and dancing with her friends. The childish bickering with Thomas Mackee and Jimmy Hailer symbolize normalcy returning to Francesca's life as she embraces her new friends.



Chapters 19 - 21

Chapters 19 - 21 Summary

Francesca and her friends are invited to another party. Even though she knows Will Trombol will be there with his girlfriend, Francesca attends and does her best not to make eye contact with him. She dances wildly on the dance floor with her friends, feeling for the first time as if her mother's illness belongs in another world. Suddenly, Thomas Mackee shouts for her to get upstairs and attend to Siobhan whose crying in the upstairs bedroom. When Tara and Francesca arrive, Siobhan is half-naked, bawling in the bed. The guy she had been making out with called her names and insulted her. When Siobhan starts vomiting, Francesca helps her to the bathroom and holds a cold cloth on her forehead, the way Mia used to do for her. That sudden memory brings Francesca to tears, and she and Siobhan sit bawling on the bathroom floor, holding each other. Later, Francesca, Siobhan, Tara, Justine, and Thomas Mackee leave the party together and sit outside to sober Siobhan up. Francesca admits to her friends that her mother has had a nervous breakdown and won't get out of bed. She feels relieved to have shared her secret, and overwhelmed with emotion when they all hug and support her.

At the end of term, Francesca is worried about being away from school for two weeks without contact to her friends. She spends extra time with her cousin, Angelina, who is getting married in a few days. Angelina tells Francesca that, "It'll never go back to the way it was, Frankie. But you have to make sure it goes forward" (Page 141). That night, Francesca starts a fight with her father and then musters up the courage to phone Justine to tell her about it. That evening, she spends the night at Tara's house, cuddled up on the couch with Justine, Siobhan, and Tara. When school starts again, Francesca attends a house meeting where Will gives a long lecture about the school's upcoming events. Afterward, he confronts her for rolling her eyes whenever he looked at her. In drama class, too, Mr. Ortley confronts Francesca about the same issue. Francesca is bothered that the school plans to put on "Henry IV" when there is only one good female role. She convinces Mr. Ortley to direct "Macbeth" instead. When Francesca brags about the change to her friends, Tara is offended. The roles for women in "Macbeth" are just as bad: only witches and crazy Lady Macbeth. Despite Tara's arguments, Francesca is pleased with herself and plans to audition for the lead female role. As she celebrates, Francesca suddenly remembers that soon after her Nonno died, Mia had been overwhelmingly happy about something. She asks her father if he remembers what she was so happy about, but he claims not to.

Chapters 19 - 21 Analysis

Francesca's friendships are finalized when she finally admits to them that her mother has had a nervous breakdown. They are first people Francesca tells of her own volition, which means that she trusts these people the most. She hasn't told her St. Stella's



friends, likely because she worries that they'll mock her or spread the gossip around her old school. Because Francesca is used to having unsupportive friends in her life, Siobhan, Justine, Tara, and Thomas' reaction - hugging and encouraging her - actually surprises her. She hadn't expected the embrace and welcomes it with open arms. Earlier that night, Francesca provided support for Siobhan in her time of need, and Siobhan reciprocated. Both girls are going through emotionally trying times, struggling to define themselves in a crazy, adult world, and it's a bonding experience to know that your friends have your back. It's interesting to note that as Siobhan cries in the bathroom, she says to Francesca, "You used to be my best friend." To which Francesca replies, "I don't know who I was" (Page 136). In a way, Francesca still doesn't know who she is, but she is slowly figuring it out.

Despite their solid bonding session after the party, Francesca worries that her friends will forget about her over school break: "I'm frightened that any type of progress I've made with people at school will be lost over the holidays. The foundations of our friendships are too weak and I'm not sure if they will hold" (Page 139). First, she calls her ex-Stella's friends, and it's no surprise that none of them answer. Next, Francesca calls Justine, introducing herself by her first and last name in case Justine has forgotten about her, and spends the rest of the break curled up on Justine's couch watching movies. This week with friends has a profound healing impact on Francesca, particularly regarding her relationship with William. Francesca is feeling so confident, that she's actually annoyed with William for toying with her, rather than heartbroken and lonely. This good feeling heightens as she convinces Mr. Ortley to put on a Shakespeare play with more female roles. Out of nowhere, Francesca remembers that before her breakdown, Mia had been feeling overwhelmingly happy. The fact that Dad doesn't remember, or won't talk about, Mia's good mood creates a sense of suspense as Francesca slowly begins to uncover the truth behind her mother's meltdown.



Chapters 22 - 24

Chapters 22 - 24 Summary

In class one afternoon, while Francesca is supposed to be researching for homework, she types "depression" in to the search box. Both Thomas Mackee and Justine see what she's doing and confront her about it. Justine describes the many different types of depression to help Justine narrow down the results. They decide Mia is suffering from acute depression and that she must get to the root of her sadness before she can be healed. They go through a variety of reasons why Mia might be depressed - from marital problems to redundancy at work, financial stress, and bereavement. Francesca realizes that her mother's moods have been swinging since Nonno died a year ago. She blames her father for never letting Mia talk about her emotions, and insisting that everything was going to be alright. Francesca decides to confront her father about his role in Mia's depression, and about putting Mia on anti-depressants to accelerate her healing. Dad is less than receptive to Francesca's suggestions and the two have a massive argument. At school, the guidance counselor makes an appointment for Francesca to see the school psychologist, Mr. Hector. Even though Francesca fights against the meeting, she finds it soothing to speak about her problems with an unbiased party. She respects that Mr. Hector never tells her everything is going to be okay, and never makes suggestions about Mia's care.

A few days later is Angelina's wedding. Francesca is shocked that not even her favorite' niece's wedding can pry Mia out of bed. Francesca feels uncomfortable in her bridesmaid dress - which shows off her cleavage - and almost refuses to walk down the aisle when she sees Will Trombol sitting in the audience. At the reception, Francesca and Angelina spend some time in the bathroom together, where Angelina confesses feeling afraid about leaving Mia for two months during her honeymoon. She says its up to Francesca to ensure Mia gets better, and to trust her dad's opinion about her care. When Francesca walks out of the bathroom, Will is waiting for her. Without speaking, he presses Francesca up against the wall and kisses her passionately. Francesca squirms away saying she can't do this if Will still has a girlfriend. She walks out to the dance floor to dance with her dad and Luca.

Chapters 22 - 24 Analysis

Once again, Francesca learns that her preconceptions about people are often wrong. Before her first meeting, Francesca felt sure that therapy was a bad idea: she didn't need another person weighing in on Mia's care when she already struggled to balance everyone's opinions. She is pleasantly surprised when Mr. Hector simply lends a listening ear, allowing Francesca to voice her opinions without judgment or expectation. The interesting, and often humorous, side of Francesca's life is that no matter what progress Francesca makes, she is constantly faced with new obstacles. Francesca starts to feel better about herself after the meeting with Mr. Hector, but the next day, she



is forced face-to-face with William while wearing an embarrassing bridesmaid dress. Rather than embrace William's affection, as she did at the party, Francesca embraces appropriate affection at the wedding, by dancing with her father and brother. Once again, this highlights that Francesca has her priorities straight: keeping her family together. No matter how good it feels to be in William's arms, Francesca knows that it's wrong. William has a girlfriend and Francesca doesn't need any more drama in her life. Cool headed decisions like these are what makes Francesca such a relatable, lovable narrator. She exposes her flaws (she would love nothing more than to wile the night away making-out with William) but she does her best to live honestly.



Chapters 25 - 27

Chapters 25 - 27 Summary

Francesca cannot get the most recent Will Trombol kiss out of her mind. In detention one afternoon, Jimmy Hailer says that he had been caught that morning smoking a cigarette with Will Trombol, a friendship that shocks and surprises Francesca. Jimmy spends the entire detention teasing Francesca for getting felt-up outside a bathroom, and announces that Will told him something important but he can't remember what it was. On the bus on the way home, Justine's tuba guy gets on, while she blushes wildly in the backseat. When Francesca tells Thomas Mackee that Justine is embarrassed because she's too afraid to ask tuba guy his real name, Thomas takes it upon himself to loudly announce Justine's name, over and over. He also sits next to tuba guy and starts a conversation with him, learning that his name is Francois. When Francesca gets off the bus, Jimmy comes with her and once again invites himself over for dinner. Again, he and Mia get on like a house on fire, much to Francesca and her father's astonishment. As Francesca walks Jimmy back to the bus stop after dinner, he tells her that his own mother abandoned him when he was little. He also confesses that Will Trombol told him that he broke up with his girlfriend. Francesca has never felt happier, and rushes back home with a giddy smile on her face.

A few days pass and Will still hasn't called to ask Francesca out, which puzzles her. One afternoon while watching Justine play the accordion in the music room, she remembers her excitement at St. Stella's when she decided to audition for "Les Miserables." Her excited happiness coincided with her mother's sudden bout of happiness after Nonno's death. Suddenly she remembers that her mother had been happy because she decided not to return to work that year and stay home with her family instead. The next day at school, however, Francesca told her St. Stella's friends about the audition and they laughed at her. When the audition time arrived, Francesca backed out, fearing that she would upset her popular friends. When she got home that night, she lied to her mother that she didn't get the role. Her mother also sadly announced that she would be returning to work after all. That night, Francesca and Mia held each other and wept. Now, Francesca feels that her dad must have been behind Mia's decision to return to work when she didn't want to, and once again, she starts a loud, angry shouting match with him, blaming him for Mia's condition.

Chapters 25 - 27 Analysis

In his own way, Jimmy Hailer honors his friendship with Francesca by revealing the truth about William's broken relationship. There should be no doubt in the reader's mind that William discussed this relationship with Jimmy - which was completely out of character - hoping that the news would get back to Francesca. It's interesting to note that William doesn't tell Francesca the news directly, which suggests that he still doesn't feel like he can be honest with her. Surprisingly, one person that can be honest with Francesca is



Jimmy Hailer, who continues befriending Mia, regardless of her strange behavior (her refusal to get out of bed or change out of her pajamas). Even though Francesca is mortified by her mother's behavior, Jimmy doesn't let it bother him. In fact, he finds Mia's behavior comforting. When she wears her pajamas all day, at least Francesca knows she isn't going anywhere. It's implied that Jimmy's mother abandoned him and that he was raised in a variety of foster homes, which would explain his relative comfort making himself at home at Francesca's house, and his desire to bond with Mia, fulfilling the maternal loss in his own life.

Most of this section deal with the theme of memory: "Memory is a funny thing. It tricks you into believing that you've forgotten important moments and then when you're racking your brain for a bit of information that might make sense of something else, it taps you on the head and says, "Remember when you told me to put that memory in the green rubbish bin? Well, I didn't. I put it in the black recycling tub and it's coming your way again" (Page 179). The joy Francesca feels in her life always relates back to the mysterious happiness she felt at St. Stella's, when auditioning for the school play, and her mother's out-of-character joy experienced at the same time. It's interesting to note that both characters lost their sense of joy at the same time. Francesca because she decided her friends were more important than her personal happiness, and her mother for an unknown reason. Now that Mia has had a breakdown, Francesca feels terrible that she doesn't know what caused Mia's sudden change of emotion that day. Rather than blame herself, Francesca takes out her aggression, frustration, and fear on her father, whom she blames for never letting her mother express herself. Dad has a history of brushing troubles under the rug, pretending everything is okay, leaving Mia to deal with the emotional struggles of their family problems. It's clear that Francesca believes this burden is what led to Mia's breakdown, and that she fully blames Dad for their family's loss.



Chapters 28 - 30

Chapters 28 - 30 Summary

Theories about why Will hasn't asked Francesca out yet grow wilder by the day. Siobhan, for example, seems certain that Will has decided to join the monastery rather than progress his romantic life. To keep her mind off things, Francesca throws herself into drama, embracing her new role as Lady Macbeth. A few days later, the students are all sent to camp for the weekend, a time honored tradition to facilitated student bonding. For the entire weekend, Francesca embraces fun, enjoying her time away with Tara, Justine, and Siobhan. They spend the evenings dancing ridiculously in their cabin, and they days eating junk food and laying on the beach. Even though Will is also at camp, Francesca rarely thinks about him until the night he shows up at her cabin door to talk. At first, they awkwardly chat about their favorite films - Will's is "The Last of the Mohicans" - and their plans for the future. Will admits that he hasn't asked Francesca out because he doesn't want her to interfere with his future. He has a plan to travel the world for a year after graduation and then applying to colleges out of town. He fears that if he allows their relationship to blossom, he'll back out of those plans.

Francesca's seventeenth birthday is a few days after camp. It's a particularly tough day for Mia, who doesn't get out of bed, and no one in the family celebrates. Francesca is particularly snide with her father (who has forgotten it's Francesca's birthday), and she spends the entire day feeling sorry for herself. The next Monday morning, Francesca tells Will that it was her birthday and that no one remembered. He tells Francesca's friends and they plan a makeshift party for her that night. Even though they're not old enough to drink, they sneak into a new club and do shots of bourbon. Everyone gets very drunk - including Justine and Tuba Guy - but have an amazing time dancing and laughing together. When their taxi pulls up to Siobhan's house, however, the fun comes to a screeching halt when they are greeted by a pack of police cars searching for them. Everyone's parents figured out what the teens were up to, and each of them are escorted home in their own cop car. When Francesca gets home, her dad doesn't say anything about her escort. He silently watches her creep to her bedroom.

Chapters 28 - 30 Analysis

At camp, Francesca feels more like herself than she has in weeks. Not only does she have her supportive friends all around her, she doesn't have to return home to see the destruction of Mia's illness. As a result, she has a glorious time with her friends, laughing and goofing around like a normal teenager. It's interesting to note Francesca truly embracing her theatrical passions. When she tried to embrace the theatre at St. Stella's, her "friends" told her that it wasn't cool and took away from her time with the pack. Slowly, Francesca is beginning to realize that Mia had been right all along: the St. Stella's girls were insipid soul-suckers who left Francesca fearing her individuality. By spending time with individual, self-confident friends at St. Sebastian's, Francesca has



begun to emulate those characteristics herself. As soon as she returns home from camp, however, Francesca's life falls into the black hole of her family's demise. The fact that Dad forgets Francesca's birthday, and then simply allows her to creep into her bedroom after being brought home by the police, shows the reader (and Francesca) how incapable of dealing with conflict he is. In a way, Francesca's behavior was a cry for help and attention from her father, but he fails her when she needs him the most. His silence reminds Francesca that she is the adult at home and that she cannot count on him to act like the parent: "He doesn't shout, he doesn't say anything. It's as if we've got nothing left to say to each other" (Page 212).



Chapters 31 & 32

Chapters 31 & 32 Summary

The next morning, the ex-Stella girls are on the bus when Justine and Francesca board. They are just as obnoxious and fake-friendly as usual. Ever since Francesca formed real friendships with the girls at St. Sebastian's that the girls at Stella's weren't her true friends. As a result, when the girls ask her what she did for her birthday, Francesca simply responds, "Nothing," because she doesn't want to share her new memories with them. Out of the corner of her eye, Francesca catches Justine's eye and sees the hurt there. It's obvious that Justine has misconstrued Francesca's statement, and hurries off the bus before she has a chance to explain. When Francesca arrives at school, she confronts Will in his office. He tells her that he's very sorry, but he won't be asking her out. It's nothing personal. In a burst of fury, Francesca shouts, "Everything to do with me is personal," and storms out of his room (Page 217). Brokenhearted, Francesca seeks out her friends and is greeted by steely faces. They've all heard what Francesca said on the bus and they're all angry with her. No one will speak to her, which brings tears to Francesca's eyes. She's sure that the girls are finished with her and won't even remember her name next year. After school, Francesca tries to hide out in the coffee shop, but is accosted by one of Mia's ex-colleagues. This woman accidentally lets it slip that Mia had wanted to leave work when she became pregnant last year. When she unexpectedly lost the baby, she decided to return to work. This news hits Francesca like a bomb. She never knew her mother was pregnant, but it would explain the unexpected bout of happiness and the plummet into depression. Dazed, Francesca walks home and confronts her dad, demanding to know why he never told her the truth. She blames him for everything - all the loss and all the grief in her life, she says is his fault.

After the fight, Francesca runs out of the house and onto a train at Grand Central Station. She doesn't have a destination in mind, she just needs to get away. Everything devastates her, especially the way people come and go on the carriage but no one seems to notice she's there. She rides for hours, replaying memories of a happy childhood in her mind. Suddenly, the memory of when she almost drown in the ocean comes to mind, and she remembers her father's strong hands pulling her out of the water. She steps off the train knowing that no matter where she is, her father will come for her. When she phones him, all he wants to know is that she's all right. An hour later, she's in the passenger seat of her dad's car driving home. He finally tells her the truth about the baby: that he hadn't wanted it to begin with, so when Mia lost it, he felt a huge sense of guilt mixed with relief. He never talked about it because it forced him to face his own emotions and perhaps he wasn't ready for that. When they pull into the driveway, all of Francesca's friends are at the house waiting to welcome her home. When they heard she was missing, they all banded together to support her when she came home. Dad lets all Francesca's friends spend the night, even the guys, which makes her love him just a little bit more.



Chapters 31 & 32 Analysis

In the climax of the novel, Francesca's emotions finally boil over when she realizes the truth behind her mother's breakdown: she lost a pregnancy around the same time that she lost a parent. All of Francesca's fears about her father's inabilities are realized when she learns that he hadn't wanted the baby, hadn't supported his wife's joy, and didn't give her space to properly grieve after the loss. The pregnancy realization explains Mia's sudden joy with the decision to quit work and spend more time with her family, and her subsequent depression about the decision to return to work after all. Although she hadn't told Francesca the true reason for her emotional swing, Mia had opened up emotionally, letting Francesca see the joy and despair in her life, perhaps because she didn't feel comfortable sharing it with her husband.

At the same time that Francesca makes the devastating discovery about her parents, she unwittingly offends her new friends and starts a fight with William Trombol. On some level, Francesca doesn't feel worthy of happiness, especially not while her mother is depressed. For a while, she had tricked herself into believing she could keep the two halves of her life - her social life and her familial life - separate, but today, they all come crashing down together. The destruction of everything collapsing at once is an important literary technique. Francesca has reached her emotional "rock bottom." Now that she has reached her lowest point, she can rise up from the destruction like a phoenix rising from the ashes, transformed by what she has learned. It's no surprise that the image pulling Francesca back to reality is one of her family - of her father rescuing her when she almost drown as a young child. Drowning is an interesting metaphor for the way Francesca feels overwhelmed (and perhaps as if she is symbolically "drowning") in her daily life. Her father's hands pulled her to safety as a child, and they once again embrace her in safety today. For the first time in his life, Dad opens up to Francesca about his emotions, fears, and hopes for the future, which restores Francesca's faith in her family. As expected, all of Francesca's friends are waiting for her at home. Unlike her ex-Stella's friends, the St. Sebastian's crew are real friends who don't hold grudges and who care about Francesca's well-being more than they care about their personal pride.

It's also interesting to note that at the beginning of the novel, Francesca had no motivations or aspirations for the future. As the novel progressed, Francesca's desires changed based on the people she bonded with. She wanted to be a guidance counselor, for example, or a child therapist. At the end of the novel, Francesca simply says, "When I grow up, I'm going to be my mother" (Page 231). Keen readers will remember Francesca's early insistence that she was nothing like her mother. Her profound embrace of Mia's character, the good mixed with the bad, shows just how much Francesca has matured. Her coming-of-age is nearly complete.



Chapters 33 - 35

Chapters 33 - 35 Summary

The next morning, Francesca stands proudly on her driveway saying goodbye to all her dear friends. Everything is forgiven and forgotten between them as they realize that tiny fights aren't worth losing a friendship over. When Francesca turns around, Will is standing in her driveway waiting for her. He hugs her and apologizes for confusing her. He says that he cares deeply about her but he cares deeply about his plans, too. He apologizes for kissing her at the parties - it wasn't what she deserved - and hopes that they can move on from this in the future. Hopefully, a future together. He promises to write her long letters during his travels. At the end of the term, Francesca and Will stand holding hands outside the school, which Francesca has learned to love. She learns that the school will be producing "Les Mis" as their musical next year, and she begins to scream hysterically with excitement. When she turns around, tears spring to her eyes: her mother has come to pick her up from school. She's thin and gaunt, but she's here. The next morning, Mia gets out of bed. She gets out of bed again and again. She's not better, but the healing has begun.

Chapters 33 - 35 Analysis

In the final section of the novel, Marchetta offers a sense of hope for the readers: Mia isn't better, but the healing has begun. All the loose ends are tied up: Francesca's friendships have been restored and her romance with Will progresses. All of the characters have embraced what makes them unique, never compromising their dreams for another, which is an important lesson for young readers. The fact that Francesca's school is planning to stage "Les Mis," the play Francesca walked out on at St. Stella's, symbolizes new beginnings and the second chance both she and Mia have been given.



Characters

Francesca Spinelli / Francis / Frankie

Francesca Spinelli / Francis / Frankie is the protagonist and narrator of "Saving Francesca". She is sixteen-years-old, of Italian decent, and according to Will Trombol, bears a striking resemblance to Sophia Loren. At the opening of the novel, Francesca is faced with the reality that her mother is ill. Previously, Francesca had been naively happy about her life: she had great friends, a great (albeit sometimes annoying) family, and a bright future. With her mother's sudden illness, Francesca is suddenly faced with the reality that her life isn't prefect. She switches schools from a prissy all-girls' school to a once all-boys' school that now educates thirty girls to seven-hundred-and-fifty boys. She has no real friends, her family is falling apart, and she questions her own identity. Early in the novel, Francesca is guarded at school, often refusing to directly answer questions, participate in group activities, or enjoy extracurricular activities. Before she fell ill, Mia, Francesca's mother, claimed Francesca's insipid friends are sucking the soul out of her, a claim Francesca flatly denies. As the year progresses, however, Francesca is forced to lean on students from her new school for support, especially when her heart is broken by her crush, William Trombol. By the end of the novel, Francesca has grown dramatically, learning the true meaning of friendship, family, love, and loss. Although her family isn't healed by the end of the novel, the healing process has begun.

Mia Spinelli

Mia Spinelli is Francesca and Luca's mother. At the opening of the novel, Mia is laid up in bed suffering from a nervous breakdown, which greatly affects her family. Through Francesca's memories, the reader learns a lot about Mia Spinelli and her parenting style. When she was well, Mia was constantly involved in her children's lives, always encouraging them to face their fears and live outside the box of traditional expectations. She sets her artistic standards high and holds nothing back when expressing her feelings to her children. Mia is an open minded, free spirited parent who has no problem walking around the house naked or making love to her husband while her children are awake in the next room. Yet Mia clearly battles personal demons, particularly in regard to the loss of her father and, as it is revealed at the end of the novel, the recent loss of her third pregnancy. Before her mother became ill, Francesca was frequently annoyed by her mother's strange behavior and high expectations. When Mia is bedridden, however, Francesca realizes that her mother was glue holding the family together. Mia is unable to attend many family events, including the wedding of her favorite niece, which pushes her further into depression. The only thing that seems to pull her out of her trance is when Francesca tells her about her days. By the end of the novel, Mia has begun to heal from her emotional wounds. Although she isn't well, she has taken steps in the right direction to embrace her future with her family.



Justine Kalinsky

Justine Kalinsky is one of Francesca's new best friend at St. Sebastian's. At first, Francesca had been weary about making friends with the ex-Stella's girls that joined her at St. Sebastian's, particularly because she previously thought they were nerdy and "uncool." Justine is described as a somewhat plain teenager, with a love for playing the accordion, and a massive crush on the "tuba guy" from her band class. Justine gives Francesca lots of space to be herself and be honest about her emotions, which is why Francesca eventually learns to love her.

Tara Finke

Tara Finke is one of Francesca's new best friends at St. Sebastian's. Initially, Francesca feared spending time with Tara, a righteous activist, because she didn't want people to think she was a lesbian. Because Tara is an outspoken feminist, she is often teased for being "butch" at school. Through their friendship, Tara teaches Francesca to embrace her passions, regardless of the critiques from those around her.

Siobhan Sullivan

Siobhan Sullivan is one of Francesca's new best friends at St. Stella's. Francesca and Siobhan had been friends when they were younger, but Francesca ditched Siobhan when she was accepted by the "cool crowd." Siobhan has a history of falling in love fast, and dating lots of different boys at the school, which has earned her a reputation for being "easy."

William Trombol

William Trombol is Francesca's love interest. He is described as having dark hair, a footballer's body, and the voice of "a sex god." When Francesca first meets William, she is turned off by his authoritative tone and seemingly condescending attitude. As the novel progresses, however, Francesca falls deeply in love with William, and he with her. William's character journey symbolizes the theme of independent fulfillment. Even though William would love to start a relationship with Francesca, he knows that he would be short-changing himself. He has big dreams and he won't sacrifice them for anyone, not even the girl he loves. William teaches Francesca to love herself first, and it will be reflected in the eyes of those around her.

Luca Spinelli

Luca is Francesca's younger brother. Although his character is somewhat passive throughout the novel, Luca represents the destruction of Mia's illness on the family. He is forced to live with his aunt and cousins while Mia recovers, separating him from all



the important people in his life: Mia, Dad, and Francesca. As a result, he becomes an emotionally sensitive child, prone to crying in the hallways at school.

Jimmy Hailer

Jimmy Hailer is a bully at St. Sebastian's, and someone Francesca never would have associated with in her past life. She and Jimmy bond during detentions together, and he is the first person Francesca opens up to about her family. Soon, Jimmy begins following Francesca home from school and inviting himself to the dinner table. When Francesca finally admits that her mother has had a nervous breakdown, Jimmy consoles her with the admission that his own mother abandoned him, so he finds it comforting that Mia never leaves her bed: at least Francesca knows she's not going anywhere.

Thomas Mackee

Thomas Mackee is an annoying surfer dude turned new best friend for Francesca. Francesca isn't sure how it happens, but as she begins to open up at St. Sebastian's, she finds herself bonding with one of the most annoying kids in class. As time passes, Thomas Mackee proves himself to be a loyal friend and companion. Thomas teaches Francesca that first impressions of people are often wrong, and that valuable friendships can be formed with the most unlikely people.

Ms Quinn

Ms Quinn is Francesca's guidance counselor at school. She often provides a listening ear for Francesca, and never judges her pupils for their emotions. Ms Quinn is instrumental in forming the organization to hear Tara Finke's complaints against the school, and in setting up therapy for Francesca in the wake of Mia's meltdown.

Angelina

Angelina is Francesca's cousin. Before Mia's breakdown, Angelina had been her favorite niece, but when the depression took over, Mia couldn't even bring herself to get out of bed for Angelina's wedding. Angelina is a unifying force in Francesca's shattered family, and she gives the best advice during Francesca's struggles, advice that would actually benefit the family, not just the advisor.

Mr. Ortley

Mr. Ortley is Francesca's drama teacher. He encourages Francesca to dance in class and changes the school play after she complains that there aren't enough female roles.

As a teacher, Mr. Ortleby provides the most creative stimulus and support for Francesca at school.



Objects/Places

St. Stella's

St. Stella's is the school Francesca used to attend until her mother transferred her to St. Sebastian's with the hopes that this new school would challenge Francesca and get her away from her insipid, soul-sucking friends.

St. Sebastian's

St. Sebastian's used to be an all-boys' school until this year, when it accepted 30 female students (compared to 750 male students). In the opening chapter, Francesca is quick to point out that being in the gender minority is not as attractive as it initially sounds. The school sounds and smells like a giant fart, with boys either ignoring or harassing the girls. Within these male dominated walls, Francesca feels isolated and invisible. The school has hung gender signs on the bathrooms, but otherwise remains completely and unabashedly male.

Depression

Depression is the mental illness Mia suffers from. At the beginning of the novel, Mia suffers a nervous breakdown that renders her unable to get out of bed. The novel focuses on the ways Mia's depression affects and devastates her family.

Detention

Detention is where Francesca first begins to bond with her new friends, Thomas Mackee and Jimmy Hailer. The boys are both bullies, which explains why they are frequently in detention, and Francesca begins earning punishments after her mother's breakdown and Francesca finds herself vulnerable to the school's many harsh rules, particularly about segregating from the elementary side of school where Luca studies.

The Accordion

The accordion is the instrument Justine Kalinsky plays. When Justine plays, a look of complete serenity takes over her face, an emotion Francesca has never felt before and is extremely jealous of.



The

The "S" biscuits are Francesca's grandmother's proudest recipe. She holds a grudge against William Trombol's grandmother, whom she claims stole the recipe from her, because William's grandmother has tried to pass the recipe off as her own. For years, the women have feuded with each other about these biscuits, causing minor tension and humor between their teenaged grandchildren.

The Last of the Mohicans

"The Last of the Mohicans" is William Trombol's favorite movie. When he tells Francesca that he likes her, he quotes a line from this film to emphasize his point.

Football

Football is the sport William Trombol plays. The first time Francesca comes to a game, he encourages her to go watch cricket instead because he doesn't want her to see him lose. When the football team gets annihilated, William is disappointed that Francesca has seen him look weak. This is the first clue that William has feelings for Francesca.

Theatre / Drama

Theatre / Drama is Francesca's favorite subject at school. Initially, her teacher, Mr. Ortleby, has to encourage Francesca to get out of her seat and embrace the physical activities (like dancing), but when Francesca begins to open up with her new friends, she finds that she loves being on stage, and even fights to have productions with more female roles staged at her new school.

Grand Central Station

Grand Central Station is where Francesca runs away to after her massive fight with her father. She goes there simply because she wants to be transported, away from her family troubles, her fights with friends, and her mother's illness. For hours she watches people getting on and off the train, wishing they could take her troubles with them.



Themes

Self Identity

Perhaps the strongest theme in the novel, which is found in many YA novels, is the theme of self-identity. At the opening of the novel, Francesca has no idea who she is outside of her social group at school: "I have absolutely no idea what I want to be when I grow up. I've changed my mind one hundred times. Just once, I'd like to get it all together; see beyond the next five minutes, but I've never been able to" (Page 35). Fearing that Francesca is turning into an insipid, mindless teenager like her friends, worried only about gossip and shoes, Mia decides to send Francesca to St. Sebastian's - a primarily male school - to challenge her. There, Francesca begins to let go of her preconceptions of what makes a person "cool," and actually begins to enjoy herself, surrounding herself with true friends who support her desires rather than ridiculing them. The biggest change readers see in Francesca is her participation in the school play. At St. Stella's, Francesca had been over the moon to learn that her school was staging "Les Mis," but when she told her "friends" that she planned to audition, they talked her out of it, saying it would take away from Francesca's time with their group. By the end of the novel, Francesca has started dancing wildly in her theatre class - when even the thought of dancing in public previously made her skin crawl - and started spending time with "band geeks," "lesbians," and "sluts." Through these friendships, Francesca learns that it's not what's on the outside that counts (and usually high school rumors are horribly false) but what's on the inside. The reader sees Francesca come full circle, completely embracing her passions, when St. Sebastian's announces that it will be staging "Les Mis" this year, giving Francesca a second chance at the audition of her dreams. This time, her friends are nothing but supportive.

Similarly, Mia's depression is partially tied to her personal lack of identity. She had been feeling overwhelmed at work, a slave to her time card. When she became pregnant with her third child, Mia embraced the opportunity to quit her job, spend more time at home, and get back to the roots of what made her truly happy. Unfortunately, Mia lost her pregnancy and decided to stick with her mind-numbing job. Around the same time, she lost her father, an important man in her personal identity. All this loss and change likely left Mia feeling very confused and vulnerable, which brought on her debilitating depression. By the end of the novel, Mia starts her process toward recovery, once again discovering the things that make her happy. At the same time, Francesca embraces her passions and suddenly, her outlook on the future begins to change. Rather than feeling lost and confused when contemplating the future, Francesca's imaginations run wild with possible careers she might excel at. Tellingly, at the end of the novel, Francesca simply states, "When I grow up, I'm going to be my mother" (Page 231). Her profound embrace of Mia's character, the good mixed with the bad, shows just how much Francesca has matured., signaling to the reader that her coming-of-age is nearly complete.



Communication

The main plot of the novel surrounds the Spinelli family as they come to terms with Mia's depression. "Saving Francesca" opens with the line, "This morning, my mother didn't get out of bed" (Page 1). Mia's depression affects her entire family, first splintering and then threatening to demolish their unity. Initially, Francesca believes her mother will bounce back, that she is simply feeling under the weather. Days pass and Mia never gets out bed, stops eating, and refuses to shower. When it becomes clear that Mia needs additional help, Francesca's family swoops in and sends the children away to live with relatives so they won't have to see their mother's recovery. Throughout the novel, Francesca is expected to undertake very adult activities, such as phoning her mother's colleagues to explain her breakdown, yet no one converses with her as if she were an adult. No one explains what's happening to Francesca and no one asks her opinion of the way things should be handled. As a result, the family begins to crumble. Francesca resents her father for brushing the ugliness of Mia's depression under the rug, insisting that everything is going to be fine when clearly it isn't. All Francesca wants is an honest conversation with her father, exposing the truth. The desperate need for honest communication is again highlighted when Francesca opens up to her mother about school gossip, her relationship with William Trombol, and their passionate kiss. As Mia listens, for the first time in weeks, she eats an entire plate of food. Symbolically, this act represents the healing power of communication.

Francesca isn't the only character struggling to communicate in the novel. Mia's depression is, arguably, brought about after she feels unable to communicate her grief over losing her pregnancy with her husband. At the end of the novel, Dad admits that he wasn't able to communicate with Mia about sad things because he wasn't able to process his own emotions. This simple statement highlights the reason why so many relationships break down over a lack of communication. Mia never expressed her sadness about the miscarriage to Francesca because she wanted to protect her daughter from the painful truth. Similarly, she never expressed her sadness to her husband because she wanted to protect him from his emotions. Mia had nowhere to go with her sadness but further inside herself, resulting in her terrible depression. At the end of the novel, Dad and Francesca finally sit down together and lay the truth out on the table. From that moment on, their family is able to begin healing. It will be a long process, but communication will be at the center of their recovery.



Style

Point of View

"Saving Francesca" is told in first person, present tense narration by Francesca herself. This means that Francesca speaks using "me" and "I" and that the only character whose thoughts the reader has access to is her alone. The reader is held very close to Francesca's emotions and thoughts, as these are the most important factors to understanding the novel as a whole. Even though the reader has full access into Francesca's mind, she is sometimes an unreliable narrator, not because she seeks to mislead, but because she struggles to understand what is happening to her family. Her memories shift throughout the novel and her perceptions of other people (and herself) range from extremely shrewd to wildly inaccurate. She is a classic teenage narrator, with wild high-flying emotions, an active imagination, and a complex set of social relationships, all of which are reflected in her narration. Because the reader experiences the events of the novel through a teenager's eyes, they only see one (often times skewed) side of the story. Occasionally, Francesca comes across as spoiled, stubborn, or bratty, particularly in her relationship with her father. Through the point-of-view narration, the reader gains access to Francesca's many memories of her childhood and the way those memories have shaped her relationship. It's interesting to note that throughout the novel, these memories take different shapes, twisting like a kaleidoscope, giving Francesca different insights into her family. As a result, her relationships, and mood, are constantly changing.

Setting

"Saving Francesca" is mostly set at St. Sebastian's school in an unnamed Australian city. The mention of Central Station in chapter 32 could be referring to Central Station in Brisbane, but this is not explicitly stated in the text. St. Sebastian's used to be an all-boys' school until this year, when it accepted 30 female students (compared to 750 male students). In the opening chapter, Francesca is quick to point out that being in the gender minority is not as attractive as it initially sounds. The school sounds and smells like a giant fart, with boys either ignoring or harassing the girls. Within these male dominated walls, Francesca feels isolated and invisible. The school has hung gender signs on the bathrooms, but otherwise remains completely and unabashedly male. Francesca and her friends feel like everything, from the drama productions to the sports schedule is geared toward male students only, an issue the girls occasionally attempt to remedy. It is also clear that Saving Francesca is set in present times, perhaps around the late 1900's, early 2000's, when the novel was published (2004). The reader immediately picks up on the setting based on the various pop culture timestamps throughout the novel. For example, Francesca listens to ABBA (which is retro, even to her) and Alanis Morissette. She watches "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" on TV and the new Colin Firth version of the film "Pride and Prejudice." She lives in a world where family problems are solved in thirty minutes or less on television sitcoms, and she discusses a



wide variety of music and films (like "The Last of the Mohicans") with her friends. While some readers might argue that these pop culture references date the novel, many of the images are used to create strong character representations and symbols within relationships.

Language and Meaning

Description

Structure

Description



Quotes

"I have absolutely no idea what I want to be when I grow up. I've changed my mind one hundred times. Just once, I'd like to get it all together; see beyond the next five minutes, but I've never been able to" (Page 35).

"I do the deals-with-God thing. Make her better ... make us all better and I'll change the world for you. But God doesn't talk to me ... He only talks to people like Mia. People he thinks are worth it. Because they have passion" (Page 51).

"I look around for the counter that sells my scent, but I'm so petrified that if I spray it in the air, nothing will come out. And then Mia's scent seems to fade away and everything else fades away with it and I know that all I have to do to recapture it is press the spray button again. But I don't" (Page 73).

"What is it with that argument? Why is it that you have to jump through hoops of fire to find out that someone's decent. The fact that someone is a bitch on the surface says heaps about them" (Pages 77 - 78).

"I try to find music that belongs to me, but I realize that Mia's music has become mine. Mia's everything has consumed all our lives and now Mia's nothing is consuming us as well" (Page 111).

"The truth doesn't set you free, you know. It makes you feel awkward and embarrassed and defenseless and red in the face and horrified and petrified and vulnerable. But free? I don't feel free. I feel like shit" (Page 137).

"Fear's good. It keeps things interesting" (Page 144).

"Memory is a funny thing. It tricks you into believing that you've forgotten important moments and then when you're racking your brain for a bit of information that might make sense of something else, it taps you on the head and says, "Remember when you told me to put that memory in the green rubbish bin? Well, I didn't. I put it in the black recycling tub and it's coming your way again" (Page 179).

"I love this school. I love how uncomplicated it is and the fact that we come from almost two hundred suburbs so we have to work hard at finding something to hold us together. There's not a common culture or social group. There's a whole lot of individuality... (Page 239).



Topics for Discussion

Describe the characters of each of Francesca's new female friends: Tara, Siobhan, and Justine. What attracts Francesca to each of these young women? How are they different from her friends at St. Stella's? What important lesson about life does Francesca learn from each of these new friends? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why does Francesca fall in love with William Trombol? Describe Francesca's change in emotion toward William. What do you think causes this change? In your opinion, is William a good romantic match for Francesca? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Francesca's relationship with her mother, Mia. How has Mia shaped Francesca's life, in obvious and subtle ways? Why was Francesca so adverse to her mother's opinions at the beginning of the novel? What causes Francesca's relationship with her mother to change? How does Francesca feel about her mother, and their future together, at the end of the novel?

Both Francesca and Jimmy Hailer have serious emotional issues related to their mothers. First, compare / contrast Francesca and Jimmy's childhoods. What is the same about their upbringing? What is different? Why do you think Jimmy spends so much time at Francesca's house after school? Do you think it is their troubled relationships with their mothers that causes Francesca and Jimmy to bond, or something more? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the character of Dad, or "Robert." Do you think he is a good father to Francesca? Why or why not? Do you think he is a good husband to Mia? Why does Francesca blame him for Mia's breakdown? Is Francesca right? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does Francesca manage to balance the stress of her home life with her academic and social lives? Which element of her life seems to affect Francesca's mood the most? How can you tell? Do you think Francesca is portrayed as a realistic teenager in the novel, or is she clearly a fictional character? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What caused Mia's breakdown? Who, if anyone, is to blame for her illness? How does Francesca discover the truth about her mother's past? How does this realization affect her, individually and within her familial relationships? At the end of the novel, what lesson does Francesca learn from her mother's experiences? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.