

Slake's Limbo Study Guide

Slake's Limbo by Felice Holman

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Plot Summary

Slake's Limbo by Felicia Holman focuses on Aremis Slake, a teenage boy who is bullied constantly. He has no one to take care of him. Slake escapes his problems by living in the New York City subway for 121 days.

Bullies beat up Slake all the time. They chase and torment him. One day, the bullies chase Slake and he runs down into the subway. He takes a train to Central Park and climbs a tree. The groundskeeper yells at Slake that he will call the cops. Slake cannot take the harshness of the above ground world anymore. He runs to the subway, ducks the turnstile and lives in the subway for the next 121 days.

He runs into the tracks to escape the man in the change booth who sees him go under the turnstile. Slake searches for an alcove, where train workers usually stand when oncoming trains go by. He finds a jagged wall opening instead. It is a small concrete room. He makes it his home or secret hideout.

To survive, Slake resells old newspapers. He collects them from the trains, smooths them out and resells them. He makes enough money to buy himself a meal at the lunch counter daily. Slake has a routine where he wakes up early, resells papers and then rides the trains all day long. He is a scavenger who collects discarded items and makes use out of them for either his necessities or art projects.

At the lunch counter, the waitress starts to bring Slake extra food. The manager asks Slake if he wants a job sweeping and mopping in exchange for a good meal. Slake agrees. Every day he receives a huge meal plus extra food for the rest of the day.

A train accident happens on the tracks where Slake's hideout is. The police barricade the track entrance. Slake cannot go to his home. He is very upset. The concrete wall has fallen down. The city must repair it immediately and it will take a long time. Finally, Slake returns to his hideout, but he is depressed because his home will be taken away soon. He gets chills and a fever. The repairmen come. Slake holds up a sign that says STOP and faints. A train conductor picks him up off the tracks.

Slake goes to the hospital. He enjoys the meals, warmth and real bed, but he feels the loss of his home. A social worker says she will place him in a juvenile facility so she can locate his family. Slake leaves the hospital by himself instead. He is about to go back underground, but decides to stay above ground to face his problems and live his life.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Slake's Limbo by Felicia Holman centers on Aremis Slake, a 13 year-old boy who is bullied and harassed by other kids. He has no one to take care of him. He lives in the New York City subway for 121 days to escape his problems.

In Chapter 1, Aremis Slake escapes to the New York City subway when his life worsens above ground. He always keeps a subway token in his pocket for emergencies. Unfortunately, these emergencies keep occurring. Slake is small and has a lot of bullies. He is also wiry, so he can dodge under the turnstiles. He is not useful to gangs because of his poor vision and allergies to cigarette smoke and drugs. He sometimes dreams he is bigger and stronger than the bullies. He often dreams of being somewhere else, anywhere else, but he does not know where.

The bullies beat up Slake all the time. Slake was born an orphan. He is still an orphan at 13 years old. He has nothing to eat. In school, on the day he must hold the flag for the pledge of allegiance, he faints from hunger. Slake often dreams of swallowing a bird. He has a friend named Joseph who hardly talks. Joseph always has a smile on his face and is completely calm. They walk the streets together and Slake talks to him. Joseph is hit by a bus and dies.

Slake finds a sweater in the subway that is practically new. He wears it to school. The bullies pull it off his body. They toss it around. They will not give it back. Slake gets the sweater, but the bullies chase him. Slake runs down to the subway, pays the fare and gets on a train. He gets off the train and goes above ground to Central Park. He looks at the leaves on the trees, wishing they would stay on year round. He climbs up on a tree and steps on a branch. A park attendant screams at him and says he will call the cops. Slake runs out of the park and goes to the subway. He stays underground for 121 days.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The dream of the bird symbolizes the angst inside of Slake. He has no one to love him. He is tortured all the time. To him, the world is hostile and against him. The bird is supposed to be a peaceful bird who sits on Slake's windowsill. But even the bird is hostile as he enters Slake's mouth. Slake swallows him and the bird pecks at his ribs. This symbolizes that angst and hostility gnaw away at Slake. It is a constant feeling for him. He does not know how to be happy or feel at peace. Even when he is asleep, the bird brings hostility to his dreams. This foreshadows that Slake will not get rid of the bird until he finds his inner peace.

Slake says, "This is the year the leaves will stay on the trees" (Chapter 1, p. 11). This statement symbolizes Slake's strength. The leaves wither and die out. They only get weaker in their life journey. Slake is the same way. He is like the leaves: fragile and



weak. He cannot withstand the turmoil of his life, similar to the leaves not being able to withstand the cold months. The leaves die and Slake's strength dies out as well. He is left a completely weak human being. The tree supports the leaves for next spring, but for Slake, he does not have this support. He is all alone in the world, hoping that he will gain strength this year.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

In Chapter 2, Slake rides the subway the entire afternoon. He touches the base of the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn. He finally ends up in Grand Central Station. He gets out of the subway and climbs up the stairs. A bunch of boys descend. Slake runs and ducks through the turnstile. The man in the change booth yells for someone to stop Slake. But no one cares. Slake runs into the tracks, then realizes there will be oncoming trains. He looks for an alcove where the workmen stand when the trains go by. He does not find one, but what he does find is a jagged opening in the subway wall. He goes to the opening and sees it is a type of entrance. It is a room. It becomes Slake's hideout.

The room is a result of misjudgment, a hot summer day and alcohol. In 1920 the Commodore Hotel was built. Two drunken workmen named Coggins and Murone blasted the dynamite at the wrong angle. Because of that mistake, the hole was made. Their boss instructed them to build steel framing to support the wall. This made a small room without doors and windows. Slake's room is on the other side of the Commodore Hotel.

In the section entitled *On Another Track*, Willis Joe Whinny is a train conductor or motorman. He does not want to be a conductor. He dreams of being a shepherd in Australia. He goes through the day dreaming of being a shepherd at a sheep station. He knows a shepherd sits atop a horse and has a faithful dog that helps herd sheep. He has never been on a horse, his landscape is tall buildings and his landlord will not let him have a dog. But what do Willis Joe and his dream have to do with Slake?

Chapter 2 Analysis

Slake's descent into the subway represents a full escape from life. Slake cannot deal with his problems above ground anymore. He must find an escape, and unfortunately, he does not have a home or a family to escape to. He escapes to the subway, riding the train cars back and forth. Parallel to Slake, Willis Joe also uses the subway as an escape. He wants to be a shepherd. The closest he will come to this is dreaming about shepherding while conducting trains. He escapes his real life down in the subway because his dreams consume him.

The Commodore Hotel symbolizes security and comfort. At the hotel, guests receive a good night's sleep in a comfortable bed. They eat filling meals. The hotel staff takes care of the guests' needs. This is opposite to Slake's life. He does not have this security and comfort. He must fend for himself. Therefore, Slake remains on the other side of the hotel wall, unable to access security and comfort.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, Slake sits in his hideout and trains go by all the time. At some point, the trains come less frequently. He settles his back against the wall of the Commodore Hotel and relaxes. The room is four feet wide and eight feet long with a low ceiling. The walls are cement. There are steel beams. The floor has loose stones and a few boards. Slake completely leaves the world of above ground. He stays in this secret hideout. Slake thinks if this hideout is down there, what else could there be?

Slake tries to remember his early childhood. He remembers an enormous backyard of a house. It is a perfect, model farmyard. It has a clean pig. The children of the house let the pig out. The children scream. A mother, father and two nuns in their habits come out of the house behind the children. Slake runs and runs. He does not know where he is in this memory. Is he home? He finally falls asleep.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Slake's motivation is to remember his childhood. In doing so, it may answer questions about his current life. When he tries to remember, he has the farmyard memory. Slake may have lived a happy life at one point. Slake's motivation is to return to that happy, safe place in his own way. The room represents an escape to this safe place for Slake. When he is in the room, he can finally recall his childhood, which is something he cannot do above ground.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In Chapter 4, Slake wakes up and leaves his hideout. He goes to the bathroom and washes up. He goes to the Grand Central concourse. He likes that people think he is invisible. He watches people pay for coffee. They throw down coins and pay. He takes a coffee and puts lumps of sugar in it. He drinks it. He takes lumps of sugar for later. On a television, he watches a beautiful waterfall. He goes to a newsstand. He sits down at a bench. He picks up little things that have been cast away such as a cough drop in a box, a lady's glove, 4 copies of The Daily News and three copies of The New York Times.

He walks and someone stops him and asks him for a paper. The man grabs one of Slake's papers and gives him money. Slake realizes this is a business. He sells some of the papers. A girl on the subway warns him that the transit cops may get him for peddling goods on the subway. He goes back to Grand Central and buys a Nestle Crunch bar for 10 cents. He goes back to the hideout. He uses the other newspapers to make a bed for himself and stuffs them in his shirt to keep warm. For Slake, these accommodations are fine because he has lived in worse places.

In the section entitled On Another Track, Willis Joe sees windows and storefronts, but all he thinks about is riding a horse and shepherding in Australia. When he was younger, his mother took him back home to her mother's home in Iowa. Willis Joe looked forward to seeing his grandmother. He told his grandma he wanted to be a shepherd. She laughed and said she used to know a shepherd in Montana. He smelled like a sheep. He said to her, the difference between him and a sheep was he had a soul. She was amused. That is the only living person Willis Joe tells about his dream.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Slake's new obsession with collecting cast away items symbolizes how he feels about himself. He is cast away by society. He has no friends and no family. No one loves him or wants him. He is left to fend for himself, discarded by those who are supposed to take care of him. He feels badly for the items because he feels the same way about himself. He collects the items to give them a proper home. He wants to nurture and take care of the items in some way. Most of all, he wants to utilize them for a better purpose. This is what Slake hopes for himself as well.

The soul of a shepherd represents the dreams of a man. Willis Joe has a soul and he wants desperately to fulfill his dreams. The soul is the fulfilling and most meaningful part of the body. The rest is just skin and bones. The soul makes a person unique. For Willis Joe, his soul determines his dreams. It is separate from his reality of being a train conductor. He strives to fulfill his soul through shepherding.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In Chapter 5, Slake has order to his life. He wakes up early in the morning for his newspaper business. He has a system where he rides the train, clears off newspapers and straightens them. He smoothes them out and resells them. He does not have to go above ground. He has two regular customers: a man with a turban and a pink-faced lady. The man looks like he enjoys buying the paper because it is dishonest. The woman always pays in pennies.

After business hours on his second full day, Slake has \$1.35. He goes to the lunch counter and buys hot soup and half a sandwich. It comes with saltines. He saves the saltines and one half of the sandwich for later. He also gets ketchup packets and saves them for later. It costs \$1.05 plus tax.

He explores the subway. He takes all the trains. He sees the mosaic insets on the wall, a candy machine, and other parts of the subway system. He feels it is a city beneath the city. He goes everywhere on the subway, except for the elevated trains because he does not want to go above ground. He sees messages on the subway wall. Some are funny. One says, "Save the world for Benny Pomerantz" (Chapter 5, p. 45).

Slake worries about being seen sneaking down the platform edge to his hideout. He has only been seen twice. Once by a little girl who asks what he is doing. Slake replies he is working. On another occasion, a man sees him and asks aloud, where he is going. But no one hears him.

Slake now knows how to survive by reusing things. He washes out Coca-Cola cans and fills them with water. He talks about his old life where he lived with his aunt. It was pretty terrible. He has never had his own room before. He lived in a pigeon coop once. His aunt hated him. She gave him bottles to deposit for money. He never made it to deposit because three boys jumped him. When he returned to the house with no money, she called him a liar and punished him severely.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Slake's motivation is to never set foot above ground. He lives in a city below the city, which suits him fine. Compared to his old life with his aunt, the subway is paradise. Slake's motivation is create his own livable life down underground. He builds a daily routine. He is a breadwinner and looks after himself to eat. He has structure that no one else has given him. Another part of his life is being an observer. He observes the mosaic insets on the subway wall and other things. He finds the beauty and strangeness of the subway when no one else can. Slake's motivation to have a livable life is possible because he has all facets, including survival and pleasure of observation.

Slake is a survivor. There is something in Slake which pushes him to survive. This is a unique quality for a teenage boy. Slake represents the survival in everyone. When people are faced with an insurmountable challenge, they must reach from deep within to conquer this challenge. Slake does exactly this. He shows the reader how to be brave and survive despite all of the terrible circumstances given to him.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In Chapter 6, Slake has a responsibility to his regular customers: the man with the turban and the pink-faced lady. He has irregular customers as well. The lady likes to talk about herself. She has a son who visits her on bowling nights. Slake wonders about her life. To him, there are known and unknown strangers. The lady is a known stranger. She says she is scared of the subway because a woman was pushed off a platform and a man was stabbed. Slake does not understand her fear because he sees much worse above ground. She is a cleaning lady. She likes Slake waiting on her, giving her the service of buying her newspaper at the train. Slake fears the man with the turban because he always has a secret smile. He asks where Slake gets the papers and Slake says the trains. The man replies okay and drops money into Slake's hand.

Slake is upset. He sweats all night long. He thinks the man will take over his business or catch him for selling secondhand papers. He stays in his hideout and reads about all the terrible things in the news. He knows fact from fiction. He realizes how terrible things are in the world.

Slake goes back to sell his papers. The man with the turban comes. Slake says it is five cents (when it is usually 15 cents). The man asks why. Slake says they are secondhand papers. The man says he knows that and Slake provides a service. Slake is stunned and asks the man why he chased after him. The man says he never chased after Slake. Slake realizes the man is not a threat.

In *On Another Track*, Willis Joe's father slipped and broke his hip on ice when Willis Joe was 18. He had to go to work for the family. The father suggested a train conductor job because of the money and great pension from the city. Willis Joe became a conductor. He wanted to save up money for his trip to Australia. Things became too familiar and too easy as time passed. He married and had two kids. The dream of Australia is so far away now.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Slake divides his world into known strangers and unknown strangers. This idea represents how Slake controls the social interactions of his life. He does not know how to have friends or customers. He must separate himself from them to understand their motivations. For Slake, people usually have bad intentions toward him. He must observe and analyze the motivations of his customers. The man with the turban represents an evil presence to Slake. But this is not reality. It is all in Slake's head. The man is actually supportive of Slake's business, but Slake is not used to support. This is a new world Slake enters. It is a world where people actually want to support him and

care about him from a distance. Slake must get used to the idea of people with good intentions.

Willis Joe represents a dream deferred. He becomes a conductor with the best of intentions: to save up money to move to Australia. But life happens and he remains stagnant. The stagnancy tears him up on the inside. It hurts his soul. This foreshadows that Willis Joe must find a way out in order to survive. He has the comforts of a decent salary, home and family, but this is not enough to sustain him. In contrast, Slake does not have any of Willis Joe's comfort, but he does have a sense of adventure and the feeling that he lives the right life for himself.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In Chapter 7, the cleaning lady gives Slake a brown winter jacket that was her son's. She says she will give him jeans once she finishes mending them. The jacket is warm and a few sizes too big. Slake loves it. It has two big pockets for food.

The waitress at the lunch counter notices him. She gives him extra food. Slake feels it her decision to give him more food. It is not hurting anyone. He feels she pities him.

Slake gets use out of everything. He is a scavenger. He reuses old eye glasses, cartons, wire hangers, scarves, and other things he finds. He gets scared because the track crew cleans the track next to his hideout. They do not catch him. He finds a pair of broken eyeglasses. He switches out the lenses with other lenses he has collected. He can see much better. The glasses are funny-looking because one lens is pink and both lenses are broken. The man with the turban says the glasses are good enough.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Slake's eyeglasses symbolize his life. They are broken, such as Slake's life is broken by constant turmoil. But the glasses can be fixed, such as Slake does with his own life. The glasses have one rose-colored lens. This represents the idea or idiom of seeing life through rose-colored glasses, which means seeing the positive and beautiful things in life. Though Slake's life is broken, there are still beautiful things about his life, such as receiving the coat from the cleaning lady and extra food from the waitress.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

In Chapter 8, Slake's breakfast consists of sugar cubes and ketchup on saltines. His life is not about a balanced diet; it is about filling the void. It is the Christmas rush. The lunch counter manager approaches him. Slake is scared because the waitress gives him extra food. The manager asks if Slake wants a job to mop up the floor after the rush. In exchange, the manager will give him a good meal. Slake says yes. Slake takes a lot of pride in sweeping and mopping. The first day, Slake orders his regular meal, but the waitress gives him a hamburger, fries and pie with ice cream. Slake is in shock. He starts to cut the sandwich in half, but the waitress tells him to stop and puts a wrapped sandwich in front of him. He takes a long time at lunch that day and he is very full. Slake says thanks to both the waitress and manager. Every day is the same. He gets the special of the day and the waitress gives him enough for his next two meals. Slake has never been taken care of like this. He accumulates money because he does not pay for food. He buys a t-shirt, socks and shorts. He saves for a new pair of sneakers.

He makes artistic mobiles for his hideout. He uses discarded Christmas things. It is the best Christmas yet for Slake. The lunch counter is closed for Christmas, but the waitress packs him food for the day.

In *On Another Track*, Willis Joe pretends conducting is like riding a horse and herding sheep. The red lights mean whoa and the green lights mean giddup. This pretend game lasts for a while, but his imagination can only take him so far.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Someone finally takes care of Slake. This is a normal experience for a child, but for Slake, it is not. His motivations are to cast off anyone who approaches him. He automatically assumes the manager has bad intentions toward him. Slake slowly starts to learn that not everyone is out to get him. In this world of adults, they see Slake for what he is: a boy who needs to eat and survive. The adults' motivations are to feed and nurture Slake. In comparison, Willis Joe must nurture his dream. In order to do so, he plays a game of pretend. Sadly enough, it can only last for a while until reality sets in. Like Slake, Willis Joe must come to terms with his own reality.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In Chapter 9, every day Slakes sees two people he recognizes. He tries to integrate with humanity and realize people are not all out to get him. He wonders about the people he never sees again. One day, he sells a paper to the cleaning lady. An elderly man asks a well-dressed man if he has seen a man with a cane. The well-dressed man says no. The elderly man says he is going to do something for him. The old man grabs the well-dressed man's shoulders and declares the rheumatism of his shoulders gone. He spins the well-dressed man around and says the same of his stomach. The well-dressed man says that is enough and the old man leaves. The well-dressed man says to Slake and the cleaning lady the old man was after his wallet.

Slake sees a man fall out onto the platform and he remembers an ocean in his childhood. A bus takes him to the ocean. The waves break. Someone calls him. A great wave breaks. He stumbles and falls. He shivers. That is all Slake remembers.

He takes the subway to Atlantic Avenue. School has let out and the schoolboys get on the train. They are out of control. The trainman comes back and tells them to calm down. Slake will now avoid certain stops at certain hours.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The story of the elderly man represents how there are still people out there with ill intentions. In this world of the subway, Slake cannot avoid all the bad people or the crazy people. He must learn that most people are good, but some are not. He must learn to use his intuition to figure out who has the best intentions for him. Overall, the subway is still a world and the world has all types of people. Slake must learn to deal with all of them.

The schoolboys remind Slake that he cannot escape all his problems. They still exist. There are still people who will hurt him in this world. It is unavoidable. Slake must learn how to deal with these people. Being down in the subway has caused him to avoid them, but this is not reality. Slake must learn to face reality at some point.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

In Chapter 10, Slake goes to sleep for the night. He puts out his breakfast. He wakes up to find a small rat eating it. Slake does nothing. He watches the rat eat the food. There is something pathetic about this rat and it reminds Slake of something, but he is not sure what. The rat eats until there is nothing left. Slake decides he cannot go without breakfast again. The next morning Slake gets wires, a stone and a tin can. He forms a barrier for his breakfast. It works. Slake eats his breakfast and the rat watches him.

There is a new woman at the platform that morning. Her name is Millie and she tries to talk with the cleaning lady. Millie finds a prescription and tries to find out who it belongs to. Her family is all in bad health and she takes care of them. Prescriptions save their lives. Slake did, but did not like her.

The rat returns again. Slake realizes the rat is not hostile. He cries because he feels badly for the rat. He gives it bits of food. Slake is shocked because nothing has ever feared him.

In *On Another Track*, Willis Joe thinks people look like sheep. As he whizzes by the stations, people look like sheep because their souls are blurred. There are all kinds of sheep. He does not realize it, but if people are sheep, he is the lead sheep, not the shepherd. When Willis Joe realizes this, it is important for both him and Slake.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The rat symbolizes Slake. The rat is a small version of Slake. It is skinny and hungry. It needs someone to take care of it. It is a pathetic creature that needs love. Slake identifies with the rat because it is the same for him. He gives the rat food in order to take care of it. Slake has a role reversal here because he is now the caretaker. He usually takes care of himself, but now he learns compassion to nurture another creature.

When Willis Joe makes the realization of the lead sheep, he realizes he is part of humanity. He is not standing on the outside of humanity. Slake starts to make the same realization as he feeds the rat. He must integrate with humanity.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

In Chapter 11, there is an ice storm. Everything goes black on the platform. The cleaning lady takes Slake's hand. She is scared of the dark. He is not. He has been in the dark his whole life. The lights come on. It was a small blackout. Slake sees a boy steal a woman's purse. She screams to stop him. Slake thinks he is not the one who stole it. The boy drops the purse and jumps into the subway tracks and runs. Slake thinks the boy has done this before. Are there more places, more hideouts like Slake's?

On Sundays, Slake has a leisurely breakfast. He sees young people holding signs to Save the East Side. Slake does not understand what needs to be saved on the East Side. He has breakfast with the rat. He makes an art project. He spray paints on one of his newspaper-covered walls "Save Aremis Slake." He spray paints a house and makes the sky green. The sky is green to him.

In *On Another Track*, Willis Joe hates life. He becomes angrier and depressed. He dreads work and home. He feels stuck in his life. When he no longer can avoid life, he rides the subway as a passenger and then makes it home in time for dinner. The ending line is: "What are the chances of any two particular objects in space intercepting each other?" (Chapter 11, p. 97).

Chapter 11 Analysis

Slake's art project is a cry for help. He does fine on his own, but he is still a child who needs love and companionship. He wants someone to save him from his life. The rat's companionship is not enough. He paints the sky green. Slake has not been outside in so long, he believes the sky is green. Slake can avoid his problems for only so long before things start to turn sour. This is in parallel to Willis Joe, who already experiences the collapse of his pretend world. Willis Joe represents the phase Slake will be in once the boy realizes he cannot stay in the subway forever. The ending line foreshadows Slake and Willis Joe are destined to cross paths.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

In Chapter 12, a train accident happens. Slake tries to return to his hideout, but the police are there. Passengers are being rerouted. Everything is taped off. The downtown tracks are blocked because of falling concrete. Slake is in a panic. He cannot go home. He rides the subway all night long. He sells the paper in the morning. He looks exhausted. He does not sweep with his usual enthusiasm.

He sits down to eat. The manager and the waitress talk about the accident. It is amazing it did not happen before because the city has been patching it for years. Now the city has to fix it. A crew will go down there soon and be there for a while. Slake asks how soon. The waitress is stunned because Slake rarely talks and he shows a great interest. She asks him why he cares. Slake takes his food and leaves.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Slake's home is now taken away. This is the one thing Slake has that is stable. To take away his home is to remove Slake's comfort and familiarity. Slake's motivation is to figure out what will happen to him. Once again, Slake will be without a home.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

In Chapter 13, Slake reads about the train accident in the newspaper. Sixteen people are injured. No one is dead. The falling concrete is an immediate danger and the city needs to fix it. The renovation will last a long time. He sees a picture of the damaged train. Slake reads it as his death sentence. He is really upset. He will be without a home again. He turns depressed and miserable as he sits in his hideout. He starts to feel sick. He has chills, a fever and goes in and out of sleep. He has crazy dreams.

Many days go by. He is still sick. He does not eat for 30 hours. He wakes up to hammering in the tunnel. He sees the lights of the construction car. He knows the city has come to fix the concrete. He takes a piece of cardboard and a pen and writes four large letters. He walks out into the tracks and puts up his sign.

In *On Another Track*, Willis Joe conducts a train in the downtown tracks of the tunnel. He knows this is the last downtown route before repairs begin. The train acts faultily. He sees a sign ahead. It says STOP. Willis Joe knows he is the lead sheep. He stops the train.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Slake's illness is a representation of his worry. Many times, stress manifests as illness. This is what happens to Slake. Slake realizes he needs help. He is a child and he cannot live by himself underground anymore. He takes a huge risk and asks for help with his sign. This is a big step for Slake because he does not trust people. He learns slowly to trust adults and ask for help when necessary.

Willis Joe and Slake finally meet. This foreshadows that the two will help each other integrate into reality. They both must work through their anger to get to a good place in life. They both must establish good lives for themselves. This can happen if they work together.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

In Chapter 14, Willis Joe runs out to the tracks. Slake has collapsed. Willis Joe takes him in the car. People run to the front of the car to see what happened. Slake will get help. Willis Joe must make a full report of this incident. He feels the sheep are no longer sheep. They are people like him. In a few hours, he can go home to his wife and children. He feels good.

Slake is in the ambulance. He wakes up and sees the sky. It is blue, not green. He goes back to sleep. Willis Joe asks the police if they will charge Slake. They say no. Slake has pneumonia. He is in an oxygen tank and can hardly breathe. Willis Joe buys him a card, but he cannot see him. A few days later when Slake is better, he gets the card. It says, "Thinking of you, Willis Joe Whinny" (Chapter 14, p. 112). Slake is shocked he receives mail, let alone from someone he does not know. The world is full of people and someone thinks of Slake.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Willis Joe and Slake help each other find humanity. The sheep are now people. Slake has someone who thinks about him in a caring way. Willis Joe is able to help Slake and rescue him. He gets him to the proper authorities who give the boy proper care. It is a cycle of humanity. Willis Joe and Slake are now in the cycle. They are living, breathing humans who care and love. They can move onto the good parts of their lives now and stop living in their subway fantasies.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

In Chapter 15, Slake is in the hospital. He likes the real bed, hot meals and being served. He feels a huge loss, like his life has been taken away. The bird Slake swallows in his dreams is anxious. A social worker comes and says they will move him to a juvenile facility until they locate his family. They get him clean clothes, an eye examination and new glasses. Slake wants to see the blue sky again. The bird quiets in him. He dreams of the bird's death. He vomits the bird out and it goes free. His chest and stomach are free of the flutter.

Slake walks out of the hospital, not waiting for the social worker. He sees daylight. He decides he needs to find his own life. He is about to go underground, but he looks at the sky. He realizes he has to stay above ground. He does not know exactly where he is going, but he will stay above ground.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The bird represents the fear in Slake. The fear finally leaves him with the bird's death. Slake is free to join humanity and make good decisions for himself. He decides not to wait to go to a juvenile facility, which is a good choice since he would encounter bullies there. He knows he wants to live amongst the land of the living, or the above ground. He cannot live in his subway fantasy anymore. He must find the right life for him, with a blue sky and endless possibilities.



Characters

Aremis Slake

Aremis Slake is a 13 year-old boy who is bullied constantly. He lives in fear daily because of his bullies. He has bruises and emotional scars. He does not have a family, only one aunt who abuses him. Slake is wary of people. He views them as hostile and out to get him. He escapes to the subway to escape the world of hostile people. In the subway, Slake must take care of himself. He becomes a businessman, reselling old newspapers, and a janitor, sweeping and mopping at the lunch counter. He is also a scavenger who collects and reuses old items. He is artistic because he makes art projects out of these discarded items.

Slake is a sensitive, quiet boy. He hardly talks, even when his friendly customers try to talk with him. He has an incredible sense of self-preservation. Even though he is just a young teenager, he knows how to survive. He views people down in the subway as known and unknown strangers. He is in shock when adults do nice things for him, such as give him food or clothes. He has never been taken care of before, so he is wary about the adults' intentions. He begins to realize the adults are not hostile toward him. When he finally goes above ground, Slake knows he cannot return to the subway. He must face his problems in the real world. He stays above ground to live his life.

Willis Joe Whinny

Willis Joe Whinny is a train conductor or motorman. He conducts the trains on the downtown tracks. When his father got injured, Willis Joe had to go to work for the family at 18 years-old. Upon his father's suggestion, he got a job as a train conductor for good money and a city pension. However, Willis Joe hates the job. His dream is to be a shepherd in Australia. He submits to a fantasy world in which he pretends conducting the trains is like herding sheep. He continues this pretend game for a while in a happy state. But when he cannot pretend anymore, he grows depressed. Willis Joe is a man who is stuck in his life. He is married with two kids, so he must provide for them. But he is not fulfilled because he does not live his dream.

He sinks further into his depression. He starts to view people as sheep without souls. He does not want to go to work or home. He grows angrier and more depressed. When he picks Slake off the tracks the day Slake faints, a transformation occurs in Willis Joe. He realizes he has purpose in this life. He loves his family. People are people with souls and he is a person too. He finally stops pretending and joins humanity. Willis Joe is finally in a good place in his life.



Joseph

Joseph is Slake's only friend. He almost never talks and is calm. Joseph is hit by a bus and dies.

Coggins and Murone

Coggins and Murone are the two workers who blast dynamite at the wrong angle when building the Commodore Hotel in 1920. They create Slake's hideout due to this mistake.

Man with a turban

Man with a turban is Slake's newspaper customer. He always has a secretive smile.

Cleaning lady

The cleaning lady is Slake's newspaper customer. She gives Slake her son's jacket and jeans. She pays in pennies and likes to talk to Slake.

Waitress

The waitress works at the lunch counter. She gives Slake extra food.

Manager

The manager is in charge of the lunch counter. He gives Slake a job sweeping and mopping in exchange for a good meal.

Millie

Millie is an old woman who talks to Slake and the cleaning lady. She tries to find the owner of a lost prescription. She takes care of her ill family.

Transit police

The transit police keep order in the subway.



Objects/Places

Subway

The subway is in New York City. It is comprised of underground trains that serve as the main mode of transit for the city. Slake lives there for 121 days.

Subway token

A subway token is the fare to enter the subway. It is a special coin.

Commodore Hotel

The Commodore Hotel was built in 1920. Workers accidentally blasted dynamite at the wrong angle and created Slake's hideout. Therefore, the Commodore Hotel is on the other side of Slake's hideout.

Turnstile

A turnstile is a metal object a subway rider must pass through. The rider swipes her/his card or puts a token in the machine and passes through the turnstile.

Saltines

Saltines are crackers.

Woolies

Woolies are sheep.

Transfer points

Transfer points are subway stops where a passenger can transfer from one station to another via passageway. The transfer point stops are connected.

Continental breakfast

A continental breakfast is a light breakfast often served at hotels.

IRT

IRT is Interborough Rapid Transit, the first subway company in New York City.

Grand Central

Grand Central is a main subway station in Manhattan. It is a major transfer point for subway transit, commuter trains and buses.



Themes

Hostility

One of the major themes of Slake's Limbo is hostility. Slake feels that he lives in a hostile world. No one has good intentions for him. Everyone is out to get him. Slake has no family, except for one aunt. The only thing the reader knows about the aunt is that she abuses Slake emotionally and physically. The boys at Slake's school are also abusive. They torment and harass Slake. They also physically beat him. For example, when he wears a new sweater to school, they take it off him and throw it around. When he gets it back, the boys chase him on the streets. Slake's life is dictated by the hostility of the human race. Joseph, the only friend he has, is a calming presence, but Joseph dies. Slake now must escape the hostility of the above ground world and go into the subway.

In the underground, he finds a more soothing world. He expects hostility around every corner, but the adults show him love and compassion. They give him food and clothes. He is stunned by their generosity. No one has treated Slake this way. Even the rat that eats Slake's breakfast, Slake finds hostile. But then he realizes the rat is like him: starving and weak. Hostility reenters Slake's world when he cannot return to his hideout. He grows angry as he loses his one sense of stability. The hostility within him manifests into pneumonia. He often dreams of swallowing a bird. The bird flutters inside of him, which represents hostility. Once Slake finds peace, he dreams he vomits up the bird and the hostile feeling leaves his body.

Humanity

Slake has a problem with humanity. He feels people are always out to get him. The humanity he knows is evil. His aunt emotionally and physically abuses him. The bullies at school torture him. To Slake, humanity represents a force that wants to keep him down. To escape humanity, he goes into the subway for 121 days. Once there, he finds his own brand of humanity. It is one of compassion and love from caring adults. They give him food and clothes. The subway is its own world and the people seem to be more generous and attentive to Slake. Many of the people do not see him because they are rushing to get to their destinations. The people he does encounter show an interest in Slake, something that is new to him. The humans in the underground are safer than the humans above ground. The above ground humans are too free and expressive, making their humanity a hostile one. At the end of the book, Slake realizes he must reenter the above ground humanity because not everyone has bad intentions for him.

The subway itself represents humanity. The author writes: "The subway, always teeming, now seemed that it would burst with humanity" (Chapter 8, p. 68). The people in the train cars represent all aspects of humanity. There are good people, caring people, crazy people and bad people. Slake sees there are still strange and ill-



intentioned people down in the subway. He realizes one cannot escape humanity because it is right there, every day, riding the subway.

Survival

One of the major themes of Slake's Limbo is survival. As a young teenage boy, Slake learns to survive emotionally and in regard to physical needs. He builds a routine for himself on a daily basis. He wakes up early to collect newspapers and resells them. He makes enough money to buy a little food. He has a job at the lunch counter sweeping and mopping in exchange for a good meal. Slakes learns to survive with the little money he makes at these jobs. He also learns to reuse discarded items. For example, he washes out old soda cans and fills them with water. He uses newspapers for a bed. He stays in survival mode the entire time he is in the subway. On an emotional level, he survives by observation. He observes people, but he does not get too close to them. He keeps at a distance for his emotional safety.

Willis Joe, the train conductor, survives through creating a pretend game. He wants out of his life. The only way he can deal with it is by playing this game. He pretends to be a shepherd in Australia, which is his dream. He imagines he is on a horse herding sheep. The red lights are whoa and the green lights are giddup. In his mind, he survives every day through his imagination. He lives out his dream this way and he is able to survive on this dream for a short period of time.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third person. This point of view is reliable, proven by the fact that the narrator knows the actions of the events he reports on and the observations he makes of other people. The point of view is important to the novel because a major aspect of the novel is the emotional growth and development of the main character, Slake. There could not be the dramatic impact of this growth and development if the reader could not see into Slake's thoughts and most personal fears. Slake is a teenage boy who hardly talks, so the point of view gives the reader a deep look into Slake's mind. The point of view is a close third person because Slake deals with intense emotions and he is also an observer.

The story is told mostly through exposition with some dialogue. The passages are not very descriptive and they are short, but they do give a personal look into Slake's fears and survival mode. This method is most likely used in order to keep the reader focused on Slake. He spends the novel moving around the subway. The reader must see the subway and the people through Slake's eyes to understand the full scope of his experience. The reader would be lost if s/he is not privy to Slake's thoughts. The events of the novel are seen through Slake's eyes. There is a section called On Another Track where the reader sees the story told through the third person point of view of Willis Joe Whinny, a train conductor. The author gives the reader a close perspective of Willis Joe because, like Slake, he struggles internally with humanity and his life.

Setting

The novel is set in the world of the New York City subway. This is a world made up of people who rush to and from their destinations. They hop on and off trains. The subway platform teems with people rushing about, especially in the morning commute. Slake does not go above ground, so the reader only sees the underground world. There is a lunch counter where Slake works. There is a coffee vendor and a shop to buy various things. Slake spends a lot of time riding trains all over the city. He goes to the most distant stops in the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn. But he does not go to the elevated train stops. He spends most of his time in his hideout, a small room in the tunnel of the subway tracks. The room is four feet wide by eight feet long and has a low ceiling. It is comprised of cement with loose stones and a couple boards on the ground. Steel beams hold up the ceiling. Slake makes his hideout into a little home as he covers the walls with newspapers and artistic mobiles of discarded items.

When he eventually goes above ground, he goes to the hospital. There are hot meals, warmth and a real bed. There is also a blue sky. Originally, Slake paints a picture of a sky and it is green. But he realizes the sky is blue. The novel ends as he walks down the busy streets of New York City.



Language and Meaning

The language of this novel tends to be informal. The sentences are constructed in a manner that is common to everyday people in modern times. The sentences follow the complex rules of grammar. Surprisingly, slang is not used. Slake, the main character, hardly talks. When he thinks, he uses everyday language to express his thoughts and emotions. There are difficult vocabulary words interspersed throughout the text. The language adds a depth to the novel that allows the reader a glimpse into a world that is believable through the language used by the everyday people who ride the subway.

The language of the novel tends to show how everyday people speak. The subway riders rush around and do not have time for formal conversations. They answer in simple sentences. They ask questions in a simple manner. Slake does not have conversations with other people. He mostly listens. He does not comment. The person who speaks to him the most is the cleaning lady. She talks about her son and her life. Her language is simple and direct. The author conveys Slake's inner thoughts in an informal language as well. He observes with simple observations and sentences. This language adds to the meaning that Slake's life is about survival. To get out a thought or a sentence is good enough. He does not need to elaborate when trying to survive.

Structure

The novel is comprised of 15 chapters, each approximately 10 pages long. Each chapter has a number. The chapters tend to be medium length for a young adult novel and have short, generic passages of description. Short amounts of time pass in a few paragraphs. The time line of the book consists of Slake's daily life as he resells newspapers and rides the subway. Slake reports the most interesting or important events to him in the 121 days he lives underground.

The plot of the novel is fairly simple with one subplot. The novel has a recurring section entitled *On Another Track*. This section is told from the point of view of Willis Joe Whinny, a train conductor. He struggles with his own life, parallel to Slake, and encounters Slake at the novel's end. This section has a different font and comes at the end of certain chapters.

The novel is about Slake, a teenage boy who is bullied and harassed so badly that he must live in the subway for 121 days to escape his problems. The novel follows his survival underground.

The novel's pace is fast due to the author's use of short, nondescript passages. The dialogue is quick and to the point. The novel is an easy read and the plot engrosses the reader into the world of the New York City subway. The story line is linear with a few hazy memories of Slake's childhood. There are no long sections of back story. The novel is quite easy to read and entertains as a whole.



Quotes

"Aremis Slake had often escaped into the subway when things got rough above ground." Chapter 1, p. 3

"But more often he dreamed of 'somewhere else' - anywhere else." Chapter 1, p. 4

"This is the year the leaves will stay on the trees." Chapter 1, p. 11

"There came a kind of order to Slake's life." Chapter 5, p. 39

"Good enough was good enough." Chapter 7, p. 67

"The subway, always teeming, now seemed that it would burst with humanity." Chapter 8, p. 68

"So now Slake was a vender of papers, a custodian of a small thriving coffee shop, and a discriminating scavenger. And he was also a hobbyist." Chapter 8, p. 71

"When had anyone or anything ever feared Slake? Never." Chapter 10, p. 86

"Slake had separated himself from the keeping of time and dates." Chapter 11, p. 88

"On such days darkness fell on Slake." Chapter 11, p. 91

"He could choose what he wished. This was freedom." Chapter 11, p. 92

"Slake did not know exactly where he was going, but the general direction was up." Chapter 15, p. 117



Topics for Discussion

How is escape used in the novel? Is Slake successful in escaping his problems? What methods does he use to escape his problems? Do they work?

Slake is a survivor. How does Slake invoke the survivor mindset? What traits does a survivor need to have? How is Slake an emotional survivor vs. a survivor of physical needs i.e. eating, finding shelter, getting clothing?

How are women portrayed in this book? Are they caretakers or something else? Which female character helps Slake the most through his emotional journey? Does any female character represent a mother figure for Slake?

Slake is an artist. How does art play a role in Slake's life? How does art heal Slake emotionally? Is art Slake's savior? Why or why not?

What does this author say about adults? Are adults hostile figures or loving ones? What motivations do adults have? Are adults the same above ground as below ground?

Why does the author have the On Another Track / Willis Joe section? What does Willis Joe's life represent? How does it relate to Slake's life? What transformative emotional journey does Willis Joe take? How is he different at the end of the book?

What does the subway and all its transfer points represent? Why does the author choose the subway? Is it a metaphor for something? Is there a better choice to set the story? And if so, how would it change the story?