

Smiles to Go Study Guide

Smiles to Go by Jerry Spinelli

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Plot Summary

This novel for young people is the story of teenage chess champion Will Tuppence, whose life is turned upside down by a series of seemingly random events that eventually trigger a greater acceptance and/or understanding of life, relationships, and himself. As it explores Will's friendships, his budding love life and his exasperation with his irritating little sister, the narrative also dramatizes issues related to the changeable nature of time and overcoming fear.

The novel begins with a short prologue in which Will, on a visit to an eccentric neighbor, learns about protons, a microscopic particle of matter which, the neighbor tells him, is the indestructible building block of all matter. The impressionable Will wonders whether, because he is matter, he too is indestructible, narration soon revealing that, over the years since, he has come to believe exactly that. One day, however, Will learns that protons are, in fact, finite and do come to an end. His belief that part of him IS indestructible is profoundly shaken, and he goes to school wondering what this news now means for his life, which up to that moment had been safe, secure, and predictable.

That sense of safety and security is due, in a significant way, to Will's relationship with his friends Mi Su and BT, with whom he has a regular Saturday night date to play Monopoly and eat pizza. That same sense of safety and security is further shaken when Will comes to realize he is beginning to have feelings for the playful, teasing Mi Su that go beyond friendship and, at the same time, feelings of resentment towards the free-spirited, seemingly irresponsible BT, who is in many ways everything the more buttoned-down, controlled Will is not. Meanwhile, Will's orderly life is also frequently disrupted by the attention-seeking tantrums and tricks of his younger sister Tabby who is indulged by his parents and his friends, much to Will's chagrin and irritation.

As Will struggles to decide how to act on both his growing attraction to Mi Su and his intensifying resentment of his sister, he is shocked and angered when Tabby tells him she saw Mi Su and BT kissing. He then concocts several elaborate, detailed plans about how to get her to pay attention to him instead, plans which sometimes work (i.e. his plan to get her to kiss him) and sometimes don't (his plan to ask her to the dance). Both success and failure increase his romantic interest and, at the same time, increase his frustration that that interest isn't reciprocated in the way he'd like. Meanwhile, he makes preparations to again enter the chess tournament he won the previous year, but finds his attempts to practice disrupted by both Tabby and his obsessive thoughts about Mi Su.

On the day of the chess tournament, Will is surprised and glad that he's doing well, but his winning streak is interrupted by the arrival of his father, who tells him that Tabby has been seriously injured in an accident. At the hospital, Will is confronted by the sight of Tabby covered in bruises and bandages, hooked up to a bank of monitors and medical equipment. He welcomes attempts by Mi Su and BT to comfort him, but it's only when his mother tells him surprising truths about Tabby's feelings for him that Will comes to realize how much his irritating little sister actually cares for him - and how much he, in



turn, cares about her. As the result of these (and other) realizations, Will begins to let go of many of the beliefs, values, and rigidities he has come to believe about his life, and also begins to accept life's unpredictability. He returns to the hospital, and is with Tabby holding her hand as she comes out of her coma.

In an epilogue, narration describes Will's happy, willing participation with Tabby in an event that welcomes her into the new world of school and which, in the symbolic language of the narrative, welcomes him into a new way of looking at, and relating to, the world.



Part 1, p. 1 - 29

Part 1, p. 1 - 29 Summary

This novel for young people is the story of teenage chess champion Will Tuppence, whose life is turned upside down by a series of seemingly random events that eventually trigger a greater acceptance and understanding of life, relationships, and himself. As it explores Will's friendships, his budding love life and his exasperation with his irritating little sister, the narrative also dramatizes issues related to the changeable nature of time and overcoming fear.

Unsmashable - One day, on one of his regular visits to the basement lab of next-door science geek Jim, narrator Will learns how protons are the smallest particle of matter in the universe, how they're the fundamental building blocks of everything (even human beings), and how they're "unsmashable." Will asks whether he is also unsmashable. Jim says he "could sort of put it that way."

Some time later, one Saturday morning while Will is fixing his breakfast and trying to not be annoyed by his bothersome younger sister Tabby learns that a scientific experiment that recorded the disintegration of the matter in a proton into pure energy. In other words, the proton is no longer "unsmashable." Will despondently eats his breakfast, reflecting on how his world has changed because of the news and on the exact circumstances of how the death of the proton was discovered (cameras recording a tiny flash of light in a laboratory in the far Canadian north). Will then narrates the regular Saturday night pizza and Monopoly party he has with his friends, the competitive Mi Su, and the spontaneous, spendthrift, late and completely unreliable BT (Anthony Bontempo). As they play, BT brags about having skateboarded down the dangerous Dead Man's Hill, whispers to Mi Su something else that he wants to brag about (in exchange for a loan of Monopoly money), and finds it strange that Will would be so wound up about the death of the proton. He becomes even more confused when Will talks about how the discovery implies the end of all existence in a few trillion years. Meanwhile, he (BT) loses badly at Monopoly, leaving Will and Mi Su to continue.

PD 3 - The next day, BT's feat is discussed excitedly by the kids at the school Will, Mi Su, and BT go to (see "Quotes", p. 27). Later, in physics class, Will is the only student who knows the answer when teacher Mr. Sigfried asks about a recent scientific discovery - proton decay. As Mr. Sigfried prompts him, Will explains what it will mean - the end of all existence. Mr. Sigfried, meanwhile, fills the chalkboard with a one and the number of zeroes representing the trillions of years before that ending takes place. When he arrives home, Will discovers that BT is continuing to teach Tabby to skateboard, and refuses to let her use his own cherished board, nicknamed Black Viper. When Tabby announces that "BT went down Dead Man's Hill", Will grumbles out a "big deal" and goes in the house.



Part 1, p. 1 - 29 Analysis

There are several key elements introduced in this section, including central character and narrator Will, and the three narratively and thematically essential elements of his situation. First is his beliefs about the proton, formed during the incident described in the prologue and shattered during the events described in the rest of the first section. Here it's important to note that Will has tied important beliefs about himself and his relationship with the universe (i.e. that both will, in some way, go on forever) to the discovery of the proton's unsmashability. When those beliefs are destroyed, Will's sense of self-respect and self-value, already shaky enough because of the multitude of fears he experiences (see "Quotes", p. 31) becomes even more precarious. In other words, the prologue lays the groundwork for the process of transformation experienced by Will that, in turn, embodies the narrative's thematic exploration of overcoming fear (see "Themes"), while the events of the rest of the first section trigger that transformation.

The other two narratively and thematically essential elements of Will's situation introduced in this section include his difficult relationship with his seemingly obnoxious sister Tabby (whose bothersome behavior in this section foreshadows what seems to be increasingly irritating behavior throughout the narrative) and his complicated relationship with Mi Su and BT. The complications in this relationship spring from, among other things, Will's burgeoning romantic attraction to Mi Su (which comes to the fore in future sections of the book) and his simmering jealousy of BT.

One final point to note about this section is the amount of foreshadowing it contains. The references to Will's skateboard, to Dead Man's Hill, and to the relationship between BT and Tabby all foreshadow Tabby's serious accident in Part 10. Meanwhile the reference in narration to the secret whispered by BT to Mi Su foreshadows Will's sudden intuition of what the whispering was about (Part 4). The reference to the proton disintegrating in a tiny flash of light foreshadows several occasions throughout the novel in which Will perceives similarly described tiny flashes of light, all of which suggest to him the disintegration of protons and, by extension, of life as he knows it. Finally, the reference to / description of pizza and Monopoly night foreshadows the several occasions throughout the narrative at which the Saturday night ritual is repeated, Will's emerging irritation particularly foreshadowing events in Part 5, Part 7 and Part 12, points at which Will's relationships with his friends change significantly.



Part 2, p. 29 - 49

Part 2, p. 29 - 49 Summary

The next day, Will visits Dead Man's Hill, where he looks down at the route BT must have taken, considers how terrifying it is to him (Will), and thinks of how terrifying he finds a long list of things (see "Quotes", p. 31). He comments on how he keeps his fears carefully hidden, comments on his strengths (his good friends, his capacity for common sense and responsible behavior), and how he has so many questions about himself and the world. "Why," he asks himself, "do I stare at the sky at night?" A moment later, he steps back from the edge of Dead Man's hill and returns to town.

Will picks up a trophy he had had engraved after winning a chess tournament. As he's going home, he sees a tiny flash of light coming from the always-on-time clock in the town square (the Brimley Clock - see Objects/Places"), a light he first thinks is a reflection of the sun but then realizes must be something else, as the sun is behind the clouds.

One Sunday at church, Will contemplates how far down the line the total end of existence will be, what that end would mean for him after he dies, and whether he'll become an angel (see "Quotes", p. 39 - 40"). His thought processes eventually lead him to the conclusion that angels are not made of protons, that angels will therefore exist forever, and that when he dies and becomes an angel he too will exist forever.

PD 19 - In English class, Will and his classmates (not to mention the teacher) are surprised when BT, whom everyone expects to be completely unprepared, actually is ready with an assignment - the recitation of a memorized poem. He speaks the poem (Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening") in a flat voice that makes Will and the teacher think that something strange is going on. Later, Will realizes that BT changed the last line. Instead of saying "And miles to go before I sleep" he said "And miles to go before I weep."

PD 27 - Will comes home to find that his chess trophy has been turned to face the wall. He immediately comes to the conclusion that it was interfered with by Tabby, and confronts her about it at the dinner table. She protests her innocence and derails the conversation by concentrating on the love note slipped under the door for her by the five year old next door neighbor who adores her. When Will continues to confront her about the trophy, she stomps off to her room, leaving Will to contemplate how different they are and how he had planned to have a little sister he could actually play with. He also contemplates the crumpled note on the floor, in which he sees "a tiny sparkle".

Part 2, p. 29 - 49 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the image of Will standing at the top of Dead Man's Hill, noteworthy for several reasons. First, it symbolically represents the place Will



is at in his life, about to plunge into a metaphoric downhill slide into situations that trigger as much significant fear as the prospect of riding Black Viper down the hill. Second, and in a similarly symbolic way, it evokes Will's experience of staring at death in a way he never has before, now that he's learned that protons are destructible. Third, it foreshadows Tabby's accident (see Part 10), which takes place on the hill.

Also at this point in the narrative, it's important to take note of Will's / the author's use of the term "PD" as a section heading. "PD" is an abbreviation of the term "proton decay", and is used to delineate and/or define the days in Will's life following his discovery of the proton's finite nature. His use of the abbreviation is an indication of how important this discovery is - he defines his life, every day of it, by its distance from the moment his life, and his perceptions of it, changed. For further consideration of this aspect of the book see "Style - Structure". In PD 8 (for the meaning of the various

Other important elements in this section include the reference to the flash of light Will perceives in the clock which, here as at other points in the narrative where he sees similar flashes, echoes the reference in Part 1 to the report of a proton disintegrating in a flash of light. Here, as elsewhere, Will believes that the flash is a manifestation of the deterioration, if not the end, of both physical reality and his own personal reality. Then there is the reference to BT's poem recitation and his changing of the last line, a moment that, in all likelihood, would be a surprise to the reader as well but which, interestingly, is never explained.

Meanwhile, important foreshadowings in this section include the introduction of the trophy (which plays an important role, in future sections, in the tortures Tabby inflicts upon her big brother) and the reference to the clock.

Finally, at this point in the narrative, it's important to take note of the book's title, "Smiles to Go" which can be seen as being a variation on the content of the Robert Frost poem similar to that spoken by BT. In this case, the variation (the pun?) is on the word "miles", which in the title becomes "smiles". Why "smiles"? There are several possible reasons. The first is that a number of times throughout the narrative, Will refers to the beauty of Mi Su's smile. This fact, when related to the title, suggests two possibilities. The first is that he has "miles to go" before he can see her smile as being just a smile and not having something to do with taking their relationship to the next level. The second, and perhaps more likely, is that her smiles help him go the "miles" he needs to go on his emotional journey towards comfort with her, respect for BT, and love for Tabby. This, in turn, relates to the second possible reason for the title being what it is. This is the idea that smiles from ALL the people he cares about (Mi Su, BT, Tabby, his parents, even Korbet) help Will cross the "miles" he needs to go on his journey of transformation so he can sleep comfortably without dreams of all life, or rather the protons from which all life is made, disintegrating.



Part 3, p. 50 - 69

Part 3, p. 50 - 69 Summary

Since their parents both have plans, Will is forced to take Tabby with him and Mi Su to a star party (at which amateur astronomers look out into space) out at French Creek, away from the lights of the city. Later in the party, while he's studying a far-away galaxy and commenting in narration that he and Mi Su both want to be astronomers, he loses track of Tabby. While resentfully looking for her, he hears of a telescope that has sighted the Horsehead Nebula, a unique stellar phenomenon that both he and Mi Su have longed to see for years. Torn between seeing the nebula and searching for Tabby, he realizes he has to find his sister, and eventually does so. As they're returning to where they're supposed to meet Mi Su's mother (who is to take them home), Tabby spots Mi Su and BT kissing. Will becomes extremely upset, but keeps his feelings bottled up even when everyone is in the car and Tabby is once again announcing what she saw and even while he sees tiny flickers of light in the distance that look like fireflies, except it's too cold for fireflies.

The next day, Mi Su explains to Will that she and BT kissed each other more because of the romance of the night - she could have kissed anybody, she says. Will does not find this particularly comforting, but makes funny comments that make Mi Su laugh but which also clue her into the fact that he's quite bothered. When Mi Su learns that the next star party isn't until spring she expresses her disappointment, Will reminds her that "the sky's not going anywhere". Later, however, he realizes that it, along with everything else, actually is moving away.

In this brief section, Will comments that it's been a month since BT went down Dead Man's Hill and three days since the star party - three days since "the silhouette on the hill." He wonders how much he doesn't know about BT and Mi Su, and who else might be kissing her.

Will comments that images of BT and Mi Su kissing are constantly playing in his mind.

PD 44 - Another Saturday night, more pizza and Monopoly, and everything seems the same - except that Will is still wondering about what happened, and may still be happening, between Mi Su and BT, and also wondering how he feels about Mi Su himself.

PD 49 - The only entry here is this sentence - "The wheels of Black Viper crinkle over the autumn leaves".

Part 3, p. 50 - 69 Analysis

Important points to note in this section include Will's discovery of BT and Mi Su kissing which, in its way, is as devastating to his beliefs about himself, the world, and his



relationships as the discovery that the proton is not, in fact, "unsmashable". Also in this section, it's important to note Will's almost casual reference to how he and Mi Su both want to be astronomers. This is noteworthy because later in the narrative, when Mi Su announces she wants to be an actress, Will experiences it as a personal betrayal on the same level as the betrayal he experiences here as a result of the kiss.

At this point, it might be worth paying particular attention, for a moment, to the character of Mi Su. Important but not developed with any particular depth, she is portrayed as somewhat flighty and thoughtless, but at the same time substantially more realistic than the imaginative, insecure Will. Her commentary on the reasons why she kissed BT may, at first glance, seem superficial and insensitive, which to Will they are. Ultimately, though, they're honest and, upon further consideration, can be seen as embracing and/or reflecting reality in a way that Will is not quite able to ... at least, not yet. Meanwhile, his reactions to the kiss and his discovery of his own feelings mark an important point of transition for him, a stage of his personal transformation (i.e. his growth into actual, more mature self-awareness). This, in turn, is metaphorically represented by the image in PD 49, an image of past beauty and health being destroyed (like the protons?) by the inevitable process of aging and decay. Here the image also evokes the idealism of Will's relationship with BT and Mi Su being destroyed - by Mi Su's impulsiveness? Will's jealousy? BT's irresponsible insensitivity? Or a combination of all three?



Part 4, p. 69 - 87

Part 4, p. 69 - 87 Summary

Will describes how Tabby taunts him by dropping his favorite jelly beans into the garbage.

One winter day as dry snow is starting to fall, Will goes up to his favorite place in his family's house - the dormer attic, where he keeps his telescope and likes to go to think and hide. This, he comments in narration, is where his family keeps all the forthcoming Christmas presents and the so-called "wedding presents," an important piece of family history. While he's wondering why his out-of-control sister hasn't ever opened the wedding presents, Will looks out the window and sees her playing in the snow. He also notices, through his telescope, that the Brimley clock has started to lose time, and the neighbor with the crush on Tabby, Korbet Finn, is sneaking up on her. Suddenly crying, painfully aware that protons across the universe are dying, Will turns away, without seeing what Korbet is doing to taunt Tabby.

Will pays a visit to BT's comfortably cluttered home, thinking he might ask BT about Mi Su but having no opportunity to do so. His visit is interrupted by the arrival of BT's father, a playful, unpredictable man who, Will thinks, is just like BT is going to be when he grows up. BT's dad takes them on an expedition to try out his new metal detector, but then gives it to BT and takes Will for a talk, saying that he can tell Will has something on his mind. Will, although he finds BT's dad trustworthy, realizes he can't say anything about Mi Su, but instead reveals his thoughts (and worries) about how the discovery of the inevitable end of existence for protons makes him think about HIS OWN inevitable end of existence. The good-humored Mr. Bontempo reassures him he's all right, just "smart enough to know he [Will] doesn't have all the answers". Will asks about the small flashes he's been seeing, and Mr. Bontempo again reassures him.

The next day, in a flash of insight, Will realizes what BT whispered to Mi Su - the fact that he's been turning the Brimley clock BACK. He calls BT to confront him, and BT seems to admit it, then hangs up. Will wonders how BT is doing it.

Will receives a letter from Mr. Bontempo warning him to "beware of solipsism" which, Will learns, is "believing 'that the self is the only reality'." Will then wonders whether he is, in fact, a solipsist.

Part 4, p. 69 - 87 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the reference to what Tabby does with the jellybeans. On one level, the reference foreshadows the several other occasions in the narrative when she does the same thing. More importantly, however, it foreshadows the revelation at the end of the narrative (Part 11) that she has, in fact, been retrieving and saving them for him. Other important elements include the introductions of the



metaphorically significant wedding presents and one of the narrative's more intriguing secondary characters, Korbet Finn who turns out to be an unexpected and unexpectedly wise, confidante for Will later in the story.

Also in this section, the character of Mr. Bontempo is introduced. Will's comment in narration, that BT is likely to grow up to be just like his father, seems accurate and insightful - but whether BT will grow up to be as compassionately wise as his father seems to be is another question. In any case, Mr. Bontempo's role in Will's life has a great deal of potential, but aside from one further letter he sends Will, doesn't seem to develop fully. He seems to have depths that for whatever reason, the author/narrative doesn't have an interest in following through on, just like his son whose reasons for changing the Bromley Clock are, like his emotional reaction to the poem earlier, are never explained. Is there a possibility, in the actions of both these mysterious characters, that the narrative is making a point about how the ways and reasons of life and/or the universe (perhaps even including the destruction of protons, and therefore all life) are ultimately unknowable?

Finally, there is the reference to solipsism and to Will's question of whether he is a solipsist. Here, Mr. Bontempo's wisdom seems just a shade out of reach of both Will and the reader. This is partly because, again, the idea is dropped into the narrative and never really developed, and partly because Will himself doesn't seem all that interested in really exploring the question. The implication of Mr. Bontempo's reference, though, is that Will is something of a solipsist, considering the world and its ways and mysteries as only being relevant to who he is and what he feels - in other words, that he's just a little self-absorbed. The narrative seems to reinforce this suggestion, but it is important to note, however, that this aspect of his personality is transformed, to a significant degree, as the result of coming to a broader awareness, over the course of the narrative, of what's going on with his friends and, more importantly, his little sister. In other words, he may be a solipsist at this point in the narrative but as events unfold and change him, he becomes much less of one.

One last point to consider - the possible metaphorical values of the last name of BT and his father, a name that roughly translates into "good time"?



Part 5, p. 87 - 103

Part 5, p. 87 - 103 Summary

One day in biology class, when he suddenly realizes he's been staring at the back of Mi Su's neck in a way he never has before, Will decides he's going to kiss her himself. He tries to decide on the right time and place.

Will decides to kiss Mi Su during Christmas vacation. Tabby discovers her carefully hidden Christmas presents (perhaps, Will comments) with the help of BT. Their mother, Will says, is very angry.

Will gets the special watch he wanted for Christmas, regulated with a regular pulsing signal from the international Atomic Clock. Meanwhile, Tabby rejects a present left for her by the devoted Korbet Finn from next door, and revels in what she thinks is the large amount of cash she's been given.

Will comments on how Mi Su being in Florida with her family messes up his plans to kiss her for Christmas ...

Will comments that it's been one hundred days since the proton died, revealing that in his dreams, he heard the sound of Tabby dropping jelly beans into the garbage.

At a Saturday night pizza and Monopoly party, Will snaps, insisting that he and his friends play by the rules meaning that Mi Su no longer lend BT any more money. Mi Su reminds him that they always break the rules and that she's just trying to keep BT in the game a little longer, but Will angrily insists, saying he just wants BT to have a chance to win for real, but all the while knowing that Mi Su knows the real reason he's doing it - he's jealous. Will, for his part, realizes he's behaving stupidly, commenting in narration that Mi Su will never want to kiss him now.

PD 108 - Will tries to sort out his feelings in the aftermath of the snap, at times feeling embarrassed and at other times somewhat proud (see "Quotes", p. 97). He considers apologizing to BT, realizes that BT wouldn't really care and probably didn't really notice what happened, and again becomes angry with him (see "Quotes", p. 98). Over lunch he tries to talk about what happened with Mi Su, saying he's just trying to be a friend to BT. Mi Su, out of the blue, comments that she's never seen Will laugh out loud, an observation that momentarily distracts Will from what he was saying. Mi Su then suggest he's not being a friend, he's been meddling. Will accuses her of not caring, worrying immediately that she thinks HE'S thinking about the kiss. Mi Su just smiles, and says she's "along for the ride ..."

PD 109 - Mi Su's last words echo in Will's mind ...

PD 110 - Will practices laughing out loud ...



PD 111 - Will continues to hear the jelly beans dropping ...

PD 113 - Will wakes from a dream of riding down Dead Man's Hill on his skateboard to find Tabby sitting on his chest. He swats her off and she darts out, bumping into the bookcase which has the chess trophy on it. The trophy falls off and breaks.

Part 5, p. 87 - 103 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the structure and content of many of the entries, specifically, their brevity and terseness. The summaries from PD's 88 and 90 are literal transcriptions of the entire content of those sections, while the summaries from PD's 109 through 113 are reflective of the briefness of those sections. This structural choice suggests the limited nature of Will's thoughts at this time, as he focuses almost entirely on his plans to kiss Mi Su and, in the latter half of the chapter, on the implications of Mi Su's comments and his dream of the jellybeans. These last two points are particularly noteworthy, in that their appearances here foreshadow key events in the narrative. The former foreshadows the moment in Part 12, First Day, when Will finally laughs out loud (ironically enough, at a point when Mi Su breaks the rules of Monopoly for HIM), while the jellybeans again foreshadows the revelatory moment in PD 226 (Part 11) when Will discovers the truth about what Tabby's been doing with the beans.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Will's watch (one of several varied manifestation throughout the narrative on the work's thematic interest in the nature of time - see "Themes") and the reappearance of Korbet Finn (whose persistence in attempting to get Tabby to pay attention to him can be seen as a telling contrast to Will's hesitation). Finally, there is the breaking of the trophy, itself a symbol of Will's past vision of himself (i.e. a representation of something he's good at, something he's confident about, something about himself that he trusts) but which, when it breaks, becomes a metaphoric representation of how that vision is breaking down. Simultaneously, it's also a foreshadowing of how that vision is going to break down further in the following sections.



Part 6, p. 104 - 117

Part 6, p. 104 - 117 Summary

The trophy is repaired, and Will makes sure he can lock his door from the inside. Will now plans to kiss Mi Su on Valentine's Day.

BT and his younger twin sisters visit Will and Tabby. Will and BT hang out in the attic, where BT asks about the wedding presents. They're interrupted by the raging arrival of one of BT's twin sisters, crying after being hurt by Tabby, who protests her innocence even as BT is comforting his sister with a kiss. A moment later, the three girls are back in Tabby's room.

Will works on his plan for kissing Mi Su. Will outlines his plan, which includes taking Mi Su out to a local park, along with his telescope, some hot chocolate, and some paper stars he plans to sprinkle over them at a key moment ... the moment just before he says Happy Valentine's Day and they kiss.

Will buys his supplies. Will begins a countdown.

Will begins to worry about the flaws in his plan, and wondering what Mi Su will say in reaction. More worries about what Mi Su will say.

Will plays Monopoly with BT and Mi Su yet again, aware that this time it feels very different and worrying, for the first time, that in enacting his plan, he might actually be hurting BT.

Mi Su comes over to Will's for help with homework. He has several opportunities to kiss her, but is determined to put his plan into action and chooses to wait. At the end of the evening, an inner voice tells him he's blown it.

Will worries about what Mi Su might say. Will sees Korbet ambush Tabby with a day-early Valentine's kiss which she angrily rejects. He begins to feel as though he has to abandon the plan

On Valentine's Day, the night is clear, the stars are good, the moon is bright, and Will puts his plan into action. It all goes as he imagined - Mi Su is quietly and dreamily receptive to him as he speaks sweetly to her and kisses her. "We were halfway home when I realized I had left my telescope behind and we had to go back for it."

Part 6, p. 104 - 117 Analysis

In the same way as Korbet's persistence in pursuing Tabby is a vivid contrast to Will's hesitance in pursuing Mi Su, so too is BT's sensitivity towards his sisters a vivid contrast to Will's feelings towards Tabby. In other words, fundamental and important



characteristics of the protagonist (Will) manifest with greater impact when juxtaposed with their opposites (Korbet's persistence or BT's compassion). The reader becomes more aware of Will's flaws in the presence of these two characters' assets, while Will himself becomes inspired to change by the attitudes and actions of two people who clearly are something he's not and eventually comes to realize he needs to be.

Meanwhile, the author's stylistic choice to once again narrate Will's experience in short, almost monosyllabic bursts again reflects the limited, highly focused, almost obsessive nature of Will's thoughts and intentions at this point in the narrative. What's interesting to note in this particular section is the first glimpse of Will's growing sensitivity to the situations of other people - specifically, his sensitivity to potentially hurting BT, a hint that he is beginning to become less self-absorbed. In other words, he is becoming less of a solipsist, and more aware that his is not the only reality, his are not the only feelings and desires that matter. He is moving forward along his journey of transformation, traveling one of the several "miles to go" he has before more fully realizing and accepting his inconstant place in the way of things such as the unpredictable and uncontrollable universe.



Part 7, p. 117 - 139

Part 7, p. 117 - 139 Summary

The day after Valentine's Day, Will looks forward to things being different between himself and Mi Su, but is surprised and a bit worried when things don't seem to have changed. He wonders whether Mi Su said anything to BT who, as Will says in narration, takes another of his half-days off from school. At the end of the day, though, Mi Su squeezes his hand in a way she never has before as she runs off to auditions for the school's production of "The Music Man".

The following Saturday night, during the regular pizza and Monopoly party, Will is happily surprised when he and Mi Su have a moment of friendly intimacy while BT is in the bathroom. Later, he is suspiciously surprised when Mi Su not only makes a gift of land and property to BT (teasing Will about breaking the rules), but later makes "a string of stupid moves" and loses. Will senses that something other than the game of Monopoly is going on ...

Will dreams that he is speaking with Mi Su, but instead of words coming out of his mouth, sparks of dying protons fly out and nestle in her hair ...

Mi Su is happily excited to be cast in the chorus of "The Music Man." Will invites Mi Su over for a game of chess before the regular Saturday Monopoly game, and asks her to a movie. She accepts, but then angers Will when she also invites BT. Tabby, who had been listening to the conversation, insists that she's old enough to go too. Will shouts that she's too young - a second snap. He realizes that he's angry at Mi Su and BT, not so much at Tabby. As the game continues, he also realizes that Mi Su also knows who he's really angry at and worries that Mi Su is never going to smile at him again, but then she does several times.

PD Will imagines a conversation in which he tells BT why he (Will) wants to be alone with Mi Su at the movies, and in which BT understands. The day after the trip to the movies, Will sits alone in the dormer attic (with the wedding gifts) trying to understand what happened the night before. He then narrates that night's sequence of events - he, Mi Su, and BT (dozing as he always does) were dropped off at the movie theatre by Mi Su's mom. A few minutes into the movie, BT decided to leave and Mi Su decided to go with him, ignoring Will's invitation to stay but inviting him to come along. Will refused, but realized he made a mistake and went after them. He searched the neighborhood for an hour, eventually finding them in a coffee shop, where BT was again sleeping and Mi Su pretended nothing happened, offering no hint of her feelings when Will referred to BT as her boyfriend. Later, they were driven home, and BT was dropped off first. Mi Su and Will sat in silence in the back seat, saying casual good nights to each other. Back in the present, Will watches from the window in the dormer attic as Korbet furiously pedals his bike along the sidewalk, apparently hoping to impress Tabby.



Part 7, p. 117 - 139 Analysis

"The Music Man" is a Broadway musical, premiered in the late 1950's, about a traveling con man who comes to a small Iowa town and convinces them to participate in a scheme that financially benefits him. As a result of becoming involved with the town librarian and her family, however, the "music man" (Harold Hill) comes to a greater, more expansive, less self-absorbed (solipsistic) understanding of himself, the world, and relationships. In other words, the essential concept / story of the show echoes the essential concept of the narrative. Not that Will is a con-artist, but like Harold Hill he is absorbed in living a life that focuses on him but, by the end of the narrative, has his perspective simultaneously broadened (in that he is more aware of others) and deepened (in that he is more aware of himself).

Other noteworthy elements in this section include the portrayal of Mi Su (in which she again appears to be flighty and something of a teasing free spirit, a clear and vivid contrast to the more buttoned down and focused Will) and the narrative of the incident at the movie theatre. This last can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the relationship between the three friends, a microcosmic manifestation of the macrocosmic situation as perceived by Will. This is, in essence, the idea that Mi Su does what BT wants and/or is good for BT, leaving Will behind to search for her, to put himself out in order to pursue her. Finally, there is another manifestation of Korbet's persistence. This is again a reminder to Will of how he really ought to be pursuing Mi Su on his terms, and in response to his feelings and desires, acting on faith that that pursuit will eventually result in recognition and eventually reciprocated feelings from her.



Part 7, p. 140 - 157

Part 7, p. 140 - 157 Summary

Will describes how he keeps holding his breath each day until he sees Mi Su and how afraid he is of all the things he thinks she might do that indicate that she likes BT better than him. "Is that what love is," he wonders, "fear?"

Will dreams that while he and Mi Su are looking at the stars, the stars they're watching keep winking out like disappearing protons.

Will watches a rehearsal for "The Music Man" as Mi Su gives her all to a musical number, and imagines that she actually knows he's there and is doing it for him.

In the middle of the crowded lunchroom, Mi Su announces her sudden intention to become an actress, telling Will that she's changed her mind and no longer wants to be an astronomer. She leads the other students in a spontaneous dance.

The three friends play Monopoly just as they always used to do.

Will reads an article sent to him by Mr. B that discusses the possibility of a parallel universe existing alongside our own, but imperceptible to us because it's in a different dimension. At the same time, Will smells his mother's Granny Smith apple pie baking, and comments that that other universe doesn't know what it's missing.

PD 175 - A month after the Valentine's Day kiss, Monopoly is cancelled - Mi Su is hosting a party for the cast of "The Music Man", to which Will and BT are also invited.

PD 176 - At Mi Su's party, Will feels a little out of the group - Mi Su is busy being a hostess, and BT is making friends with all the other kids in the show. Suddenly Tabby arrives, having snuck out of the house. For a while she is the center of attention, but then Will's mother calls and demands that she come home. BT offers to take her, and for a while, Will (who comments in narration on how Tabby is always ruining his life) is the center of attention, but then BT returns and HE is the most popular guy in the room. A few more failed attempts to get some time alone with Mi Su and Will leaves.

PD 178 - Will resolves to no longer watch "Music Man" rehearsals.

PD 183 - Will and five year old Korbet have a conversation in which Korbet reveals that he doesn't mind that Tabby doesn't like him - sometimes he's sad about it, but soon back to loving her). Conversation also reveals that there's a tradition at the local school called First Day - the children starting Grade One (like Tabby and Korbet will be soon) are walked into an assembly with an older family member, sort of a reverse of graduation. Will realizes he's probably going to have to walk Tabby, but doesn't feel much like it. Finally, Will asks Korbet whether he ever gets jealous when other boys play with Tabby. Korbet asks what being jealous actually IS.



Part 7, p. 140 - 157 Analysis

The novel's thematic interest in the nature and manifestations of fear again surfaces in this section, as Will wonders whether feelings of attraction and love are, on some level, fundamentally defined and/or shaped by fear. They certainly seem to be for him, a situation which, it could be argued, is common to just about everyone (teenager or otherwise) who has ever loved someone else. The contrast here, once again, is Korbet, and it's very interesting to note how a five year old, essentially inexperienced in life, is nevertheless a source of important, thematically relevant wisdom to both Will and the reader.

Other important points to note in this section include the reference to apple pie, the reference to First Day (which plays an important part in the narrative's resolution - see Part 11, PD 226, and also Part 12, "First Day"), and the reference to the stars disappearing like protons. This last is particularly noteworthy, in that it functions on a couple of different levels. The first is the manifesting of Will's sense, (in the way that the references to disappearing protons throughout the novel do), that he is running out of time in both his life as a whole and in reaching his immediate goal of being with Mi Su. The second level of the image's function has to do with the possibility of his relationship with Mi Su who once used to be interested in both the stars and in him, but whose interest now seems to be blinking out like the stars and the protons.

Finally, this section is notable for its juxtapositions of the familiar and the safe (the regular Monopoly game) with the longed for (Will's fantasy about Mi Su knowing he's watching her rehearse) and the frighteningly new (Mi Su's apparently impulsive decision to become an actress). All these incidents are manifestations of Will's essential ongoing conflicts between a desire to keep things the same and a longing for things to be different. He is fearful when changes actually do happen, but not in the way he wants them to.



Part 8, p. 157 - 174

Part 8, p. 157 - 174 Summary

Will describes how Mi Su is always so nice to him, commenting that he doesn't want "nice."

Tabby, in celebration of her version of Halloween, plays a series of tricks (including stealing his watch) that drives Will crazy. BT stops by for a visit, and plays with her outside. At dinner, Will asks Tabby why she doesn't like Korbet, but she doesn't answer, instead cuddling up with BT. Will remembers BT cuddling with his own little sister, and feels jealous.

Will comments that he's really sick of Mi Su being "nice" to him.

Two hundred days after hearing about the death of protons, Will wonders what effect dying protons is having across the universe (see "Quotes", p. 200).

Will has an idea about how to get Mi Su to stop being so nice and places an order on eBay. Will receives the gift he ordered - a figurine based on a character in "The Music Man." He wonders how to give the figurine to Mi Su and keeps thinking until he comes up with an idea. Will gives the figurine to Mi Su, and the two of them spend the rest of the day together, ending it with a romantic, "non-nice" kiss."

As he describes telling Mi Su that he plans to attend both performances of "The Music Man," Will also describes his plan for asking her to the Freshman Dance, adding that thinking about the plan is almost more fun than thinking about what will happen at the dance itself (p. 168). Sitting in the dormer attic, he watches as Tabby argues with BT about not being allowed to do something she wants to do.

Will keeps imagining his plan and Will imagines what Mi Su's name would sound like with his last name.

Will loves the first performance of "Music Man," realizing that for Mi Su and the other actors, performing is like going down Dead Man's Hill.

On the night of the second performance, surrounded by crowds of people but conquering his nervousness, Will pulls Mi Su aside, compliments her performance, and asks her to the dance. Mi Su confesses that someone has asked her, says it's no big deal, and runs into the crowd, leaving Will wondering if one of the people she's running past is the boy who asked her.



Part 8, p. 157 - 174 Analysis

Twice in this section, Will obsesses over a plan, trying to control and shape the course of events in order to make something happen that he desperately desires. In the case of the first plan, he gets exactly what he wants, his success inspiring him to make a second plan, convinced that that success makes the success of the second plan inevitable. He is shocked, hurt and surprised, however, when that plan turns out to be a failure. Here again is another example of a situation that teaches Will that the universe, like the protons he once believed to be indestructible, does not always act according to a person's solipsistic, self-absorbed desires, needs, and beliefs.

Then there is the repetition of the image of BT as a good, warm, friendly big brother type (PD 191) which again is a telling contrast to Will's much greater resentment of his sister and which, again, foreshadows Will's eventual transformation (Part 12) into just that sort of big brother). One other noteworthy point of foreshadowing is somewhat ironic, given the image of Tabby and BT cuddling. This is Tabby's argument with BT, which foreshadows her decision in Part 10 to ride down Dead Man's Hill on her own and her subsequent accident which, in turn, is again foreshadowed by Will's comment that for Mi Su, performing is like going down Dead Man's Hill - taking a risk in the name of enjoyment and, to a degree, self-fulfillment.



Part 9, p. 174 - 188

Part 9, p. 174 - 188 Summary

In the dormer attic, Will broods about how it's even possible that Mi Su could be going with someone else to the dance (see "Quotes", p. 174). Below, Tabby argues with BT about his not allowing her to ride his skateboard on the sidewalk. Meanwhile, Will looks at the wedding gifts, wondering whether they'll still be there unopened decades from now.

Will, angry about BT and Mi Su, rides his skateboard a dozen times past Mi Su's house, hoping to see her. Eventually, he talks to Korbet, asking what Korbet would do if he asked Tabby to a dance and she went with someone else. Korbet, whose eyes at this moment look "older than five", says he'd ask her to the NEXT one.

Will plays chess with his father in an effort to get ready for an upcoming chess tournament. His obsession with Mi Su, however, combines with Tabby's constant pestering to mess up Will's concentration and, for the first time in a long time, lose to his father.

During lunch at school the next day, Mi Su calls Will "Grumpy", saying there will be more dances, and that she still likes him. Will tells her he's fine.

Will tells his father he's withdrawing from the chess tournament, saying he can't concentrate because of Tabby. His father tells him to take the night off and clear his head.

Will tells Mi Su and BT a portion of the truth - that he's not going to the tournament because interference from Tabby has kept him from having good practice time. Later, he bumps into Danny Riggs, the boy taking Mi Su to the dance. Danny speaks politely to him, but Will thinks he was just being nice to "the poor pathetic loser, the FORMER boyfriend" (p. 188).

Part 9, p. 174 - 188 Analysis

Tabby's arguments with BT continue to foreshadow her accident in Part 10 (the following section) which happens in part because of her determination to do what she wants to do in spite of other people telling her she can't. Meanwhile, there is an almost comic parallel drawn between Korbet and Will, whose obsessive skateboarding past Mi Su's house (to get her to notice him) clearly echoes Korbet's obsessive bike riding past Tabby and Will's (to get Tabby to notice HIM). Once again, however, Korbet's wisdom proves to be both appropriate and inspiring, even though Will doesn't act immediately on it. Then there is the reference to the wedding gifts, with Will's contemplation of their future functioning on two levels. The first is as a metaphoric representation of his wondering whether he (his feelings, desires, hopes and dreams) will be opened and



revealed at some point in the future. The second, and related, level of function is as a foreshadowing of the moment (Part 12) in which he rips open the presents and, simultaneously, discovers both a soaring hope for the future and feelings of affection for his little sister. Finally, there is the introduction of the upcoming chess tournament into the narrative, foreshadowed in previous sections by the references to the chess trophy (Will having won the trophy in the same annual tournament the previous year). That tournament takes place in the following section and serves as a key point of focus for both Will's internal journey of transformation and a change in external circumstances that, in turn, takes that internal journey even further.



Part 10, p. 188 - 207

Part 10, p. 188 - 207 Summary

PD 225 - On the day of the chess tournament, Will decides he's going to give it a try. At breakfast, Tabby is told she's not going and has a tantrum. At the tournament, Will is happily surprised at how well his first few games go. Later, when he faces his first real challenge, he rises to the occasion by focusing tightly and closely on the game and particularly on the board. His near-win is interrupted by his father - Tabby has been hurt and is in the hospital. As they drive to the hospital, Will's father explains what happened - Tabby went missing after lunch, Aunt Nancy (who had been babysitting) went looking for her and found her at the top of Dead Man's Hill, having fallen off the skateboard she was riding.

When Will and his parents arrive at the hospital emergency room, they are shocked to find that Tabby is surrounded by physicians. When one of them (Dr. Fryman) speaks to them a few hours later, they are further shocked to learn that Tabby is quite seriously hurt, possibly with a concussion, and that she is both sedated and breathing with the help of a machine to help her body settle down. Will asks to see her and doesn't recognize her since she's so bruised up.

Will's mother decides to stay the night at the hospital. Will's father takes Will home, and they find Mi Su and BT waiting. After receiving hugs from them both (and feeling a bit odd at receiving his first ever hug from BT) Will goes inside. Aunt Nancy gives him his skateboard, the one that Tabby had been riding, and also a note from Korbet for Tabby. Will is then left alone when his father takes Aunt Nancy back home, and goes to bed right away. He wakes up suddenly, aware of something going on in the dormer. He leaves the house, at first trying to ride his skateboard but then throwing it into a shrub and walking, looking at his watch and realizing that looking at his watch isn't going to tell him what he needs to know .

Part 10, p. 188 - 207 Analysis

The novel's narrative momentum begins to accelerate here (the metaphor of a skateboard speeding up as it goes down a hill comes to mind), moving towards its climax in Part 12. After meandering, somewhat, over the past several pages, and after being mostly defined by Will's rather neurotic worrying about time, Mi Su, and the irritations of his sister, harsh reality crashes in in the form of Tabby's accident. Important points to note about this circumstance include the fact that once again, something important to Will (the chess tournament) is disrupted by Tabby (only this time it's not deliberate and there's something seriously wrong) and the discoveries Will makes about the compassionate nature of his friends.



Other important moments include the reference to the dormer (which foreshadows events in the following section, which contains the novel's climax), the reference to the skateboard (with Will's throwing it away serving as a metaphoric reference to, and/or a foreshadowing of, the aspects of his life that he is in the process of throwing away. These include his resentment of Tabby, his confusion about Mi Su, his jealousy of BT, and his fear of losing his identity, and his reliance on time. This last aspect of his transformation is reinforced by the discovery he makes about his watch at the conclusion of this section, which in turn relates to a final point to note about this section. This is the idea that there is considerable irony in Will's reference to how to play chess - specifically, the irony of thinking ahead and planning in chess when he, over and over again, has his internal plans, beliefs, dreams and/or values completely wrecked by the unpredictable feelings and/or actions of others - in other words, by external situations. Tabby's accident is perhaps the most extreme example of this, but other important examples include Mi Su and BT's kiss and the comments of Korbet Finn. There is also the news of the death of the proton, and even, at the beginning of the book, his learning of the unsmashability of the proton in the first place, a discovery that rocks his world almost as much as the later discovery that it is quite smashable.



Part 11, p. 207 - 230

Part 11, p. 207 - 230 Summary

The day after Tabby's accident, Mi Su reassures Will that Tabby is going to be okay. When he starts blaming BT (for showing Tabby how to skateboard) and then himself (for keeping her from coming to the tournament), she becomes angry, telling Will that Tabby loves him. Later, as he's leaving to go to the hospital, Will finds a tearful BT on the doorstep, who blames himself for what happened. Will tells him he's been like a second brother to Tabby, and comments in narration that BT has been a better brother than he (Will) has been. At the hospital, Will has a quiet conversation with his mother, who's reassured that he's worried about his sister, but concerned that he still believes the only reason Tabby behaves as she does is to upset him. She (Will's mom) tells him to go home and take a good look at Ozzie, then meet her back at the hospital. He does, and discovers that Tabby keeps a jar of Will's favorite jellybeans hidden inside Ozzie's tummy. Back at the hospital, Will's mom explains that Tabby saves the jelly beans to give him as a gift, and that Tabby is scared he loves everything else in his life more than her. She also tells Will that Tabby has never opened the wedding gifts because she's been told that if she does, Will won't walk with her on First Day (see Part 7, PD 183). And then she asks whether Will even knows what color Tabby's eyes are.

Will describes how his mother spends all her time with Tabby, but how being with her for long periods makes him restless. He goes out for a run through the town, and winds up back at the house, where he contemplates Ozzie's jelly-bean tummy and finds a voice mail message from Mi Su, saying she's canceled her date with Danny. Back at the hospital, Will is left alone with Tabby while his dad takes his mom home to shower and change. He is, at first, scared to touch her, but finally does, remembering how often she'd been told to hold his hand while crossing the street. He starts to read to her, but after a few moments lifts one of her eyelids and sees that her eyes are a brilliant green that is somehow familiar. That night he has another dream, in which he's buried underground while above him, first BT then Tabby are looking for him with a metal detector

Part 11, p. 207 - 230 Analysis

While the events of the previous section come across as quite shattering simply in terms of what happens, there is the sense that the events of this section are perhaps even more shattering, at least for Will, simply because of what they mean and how they change his perceptions and/or his life. He is, essentially, challenged to become less solipsistic, less self-absorbed, and less neurotic. Mi Su basically orders him to, his mother shows him reasons why, and BT, simply by having a conscience, leads Will into an act of compassion and self-reflection (as opposed to his more usual self-pity) that simultaneously manifests and furthers his journey of transformation. Then there is the discovery of the jelly beans (which, Will's mother says, Tabby has been retrieving from



the garbage where she drops them, cleaning them off, and storing them in Ozzie) which, more than anything (at least to this point) challenges Will to look beyond what he believes and take more account of a reality he hadn't considered. There are clear echoes here of what happens to him as the result of his discoveries about the finite nature of the proton - in both cases, his beliefs are shaken and he emerges a better, more open, more realistic person. At this point, the stage is more fully set than ever for the release of feeling, and subsequent realizations and/or transformations, that occur in the climactic final section.

Other noteworthy points in this section include the reference to Tabby's green eyes (which foreshadows the revelation, in the following section, of what the green reminds Will of and why it's important to both him and the book), and the reference to Will taking Tabby's hand. This is another piece of foreshadowing, of two of the book's most important moments when Will takes Tabby's hand as she comes out of her coma and later, as he prepares to walk with her on First Day.



Part 12, p. 230 - 248

Part 12, p. 230 - 248 Summary

Will returns to school, but even reassuring glances from Mi Su can't keep him from being restless, so he "pulls a BT" and goes home in the middle of the day. The house feels empty and strange, and the sound of Korbet outside obsessively pedaling his bike is annoying, and the memories of Tabby are surging, and suddenly Will realizes the only thing he can do is behave as Tabby behaves. He rampages through the house pulling all the Tabby tricks he can think of. At one point, he races up to the dormer attic and rips the wrappings off all the wedding presents, suddenly discovering that his great grandmother, whom everyone had always referred to as Margaret, was actually called Betsy by her family. That, he comments in narration, "made all the difference" and he rushes to his telescope where he imagines himself looking back in time and seeing Betsy and her husband. Will then goes outside, retrieves his skateboard, and takes it to Dead Man's Hill. Standing at its top, he imagines what Tabby was thinking when SHE stood there. He looks out at the town, focusing on the Brimley clock, and then at his watch, and suddenly realizes what Tabby was feeling scared. This, in turn, makes him realize that even though she was scared she took a chance and tried to ride down the hill. He stands on his skateboard, imagines her there with him, imagines her saying "see me...see me" and then kicks his skateboard down the hill. Back at the hospital, Will's mom tells him angrily that they've been trying to call him - the doctors are planning to bring Tabby out of her induced coma and they want him there. Will is therefore at Tabby's side, holding her limp hand as the medication keeping her comatose is eased, and she slowly emerges into consciousness. As she does so, Will tells her all the things he's done (including opening the wedding gifts) and promising to buy her a skateboard of her own. As he talks, he feels her hand squeezing his.

As Will describes standing with Tabby in the lobby of the elementary school for the First Day ceremony, he also describes how her dress matches her eyes, and realizes what they remind him of - the Granny Smith apples that their mom uses in her pies. He also describes an important part of the First Day ceremony - the passing of the pebble received by the older student on his/her first day to his/her younger sibling. He comments on how BT is walking with his younger twin sisters and how Mi Su is walking with Korbet; how Korbet and Tabby are actually talking with each other; how Mi Su and BT spent so much time with Tabby in the four months since her accident; and how it was the best summer of his life. He also describes the most recent Monopoly game, in which BT made big money and he (Will) lost, finally laughing out loud when Mi Su offers him a loan! Finally, he comments on how he doesn't really know where his and Mi Su's relationship is going, and doesn't really care. As the ceremony begins, Will comments on how things have changed for him and all he's thinking about is walking down the aisle with his sister.



Part 12, p. 230 - 248 Analysis

There is a large number of notable elements in this final section of the book. To take them in the order in which they occur, the first is the comment in narration that Will is doing "a BT" or an act that suggests he is not just a rule breaker, but someone experiencing freedom and spontaneity, something Will has not been notable for up to this point. Here again, he can be seen as becoming free from previous beliefs and values, but unlike his response to the news about the proton, changes are not forced on him - they are chosen. This idea, that Will is breaking free of rigidity, is further developed in his (again conscious) decision to be like Tabby, a somewhat more destructive free spirit than BT, but still one in her own right. Embracing and playing with this freedom leads Will to perhaps the most important moment in the book in terms of his personal transformation - the unwrapping of the wedding presents and his subsequent glance across time, a moment that is noteworthy for several reasons. Metaphorically, the unwrapping of the presents represents Will's unwrapping of himself to reveal the truth of his feelings about his sister, about his friends, and about his fears. The discovery of his great-grandmother's name reinforces the idea that, like her, Will has an identity, a freer identity, than had previously been believed. The imagined glimpse of his grandparents across time, meanwhile, reinforces the idea that time, for Will, is not what he thought it was, that it's changeable and unpredictable, said changeability in turn leading to possibilities for freedom and self - discovery. In other words, the change in his beliefs about time resulting from the news of the proton is not necessarily a bad thing.

Then there is Will's confrontation with his fears at the top of Dead Man's Hill, which the narrative cleverly defines not by having him go down the hill himself, but by kicking away his skateboard, another representation of his letting go of his past. The confrontation of his fears, and his coming face to face with the truth of himself, is instead represented by his visit to Tabby, which manifests a genuine embracing of his new truth and his new reality in a way that a ride down Dead Man's Hill could never do. Finally, there is the image of Will holding Tabby's hand as she comes out of her coma, an image of Will's new truth as well as a metaphoric representation of where Will himself is along his journey. Mi Su, BT, his parents, Korbet, have all held Will's hand as he has come out of his coma, illusions, and beliefs about life and into a more conscious awareness of reality and of the reality of his relationships with himself and with others.

All the changes that Will has gone through come together in the chapter's final moments, as he and Tabby, both literally and metaphorically, make plans to walk into their future together. Here the narrative reveals the metaphoric meaning of Tabby's green eyes, explores the idea of Will passing on what he has learned and is learning to his sister (through the symbolism of the pebble), and finally shows Will laughing out loud. The sense here is that Will has finally discovered an important part of his life that seems to have been missing, buried beneath his fear and resentment and neuroses and longing - joy, pure unfettered joy in living, in the company of others, in himself, and in the unpredictability of life, love, and friendship.



Characters

Will Tuppence

Will is the novel's central character and protagonist, a high school student with a talent and fondness for chess, a couple of very good friends (and a ritual they share for sustaining their friendship), and a burgeoning crush on one of those friends, a girl named Mi Su. He also has an extremely bothersome little sister, a self-perceived tendency towards overwhelming fearfulness, a passion for astronomy, and an inquiring mind. In other words, he has a very full, kind of complicated life. All these aspects of his character, life and personality play roles in the narrative, all trigger various conflicts within that narrative, and all challenge him to change his perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about himself, his relationships, and how he interacts with the world around him. He is a multi-faceted and intriguing character, coming across as struggling with several of the concerns that contemporary teens can be seen as struggling with. Ultimately, though, what makes the character and his story really interesting is this. Over the course of the narrative, as Will makes discoveries about himself and the people / places / attitudes with whom he interacts, he is also struggling with larger archetypal questions about humanity's place in the universe. These questions include what it means to be a unique, caring human being in this near-infinite and almost completely unknowable and unpredictable universe. He intuits that when it comes right down to it, all that he or any other human beings on the planet really are specks of dust in a vast field of possibility. Ultimately, though, his journey of transformation over the course of the narrative takes him beyond that insight into something deeper, the sense that even though an individual human being is smaller than microscopic in the big scheme of things, aspects of life and existence also make us miraculous, unique, and worthy of happiness.

Mi Su

Mi Su is one of Will's two best friends. She an outspoken, impulsive, and vivacious young woman. Her and BT's friendship with Will is built primarily on time the three of them spend together every Saturday eating pizza and playing Monopoly, a ritual the narrative suggests they've shared for years. Over the course of the narrative, however, the habits and contentment with that ritual are challenged and changed, primarily as the result of Will's emerging romantic feelings for Mi Su and his similarly emerging resentment when he discovers that his two friends have, in fact, shared a romantic moment or two of their own. Mi Su sees both that moment, and her involvement with Will, as more experimental and/or the product of spontaneity than anything else - she seems, in a fundamental way, to be interested more in having fun and exploring than in taking the attentions of either of the young men in her life too seriously.



BT (Anthony Bontempo)

BT is the other of Will's two best friends, an introspective, deceptively careless, surprisingly sensitive young man. He is in some ways quite predictable (i.e. his habits at Monopoly, his lack of apparent commitment to school) and in other ways quite surprising (i.e. his sudden expressions of feeling and his affection towards his younger sisters, a clear and vivid contrast to Will's feelings about his). Ultimately he, like Mi Su, is portrayed as being quite casual and relaxed about life, as opposed to Will, who seems more than a little wound up.

In their own ways, Mi Su and BT are supportive of Will and respectful of his emotional volatility under the circumstances, and transcend their own resentments (of HIS resentments) in order to support him when he and his family need it most. In short, the circle of three friends undergoes significant challenges which they meet with mutual support and compassion. As such, they embody and manifest one of the work's central themes, the nature and value of friendship.

Tabby

Tabby (short for Tabitha) is Will's five-year-old sister. She is portrayed throughout most of the narrative as being extraordinarily troublesome and pesky, seemingly taking every opportunity to mischievously tease, taunt, and otherwise irritate her big brother. Her and Will's parents are extraordinarily tolerant of her and urge Will to be the same, but every once in a while his temper snaps with her, and she retreats. Late in the narrative, after Tabby's curiosity has led her into a dangerous, life-threatening situation, Will's mother reveals that the only reason Tabby puts so much time and energy into irritating her brother is that she (Tabby) wants to be like him and wants him to love her. After Will discovers proof of this (see Part 11), he begins to change his mind about his sister, his feelings and attitudes towards her subsequently starting to change. This means that the relationship between Will and Tabitha can be seen as exploring and manifesting another of the book's central themes, the nature and value of love.

Will's Parents

For much of the narrative, Will's mother and father appear very little, coming into the action only at points when Will wants to complain about how little they're disciplining Tabitha and/or protecting him from her. In the book's latter third, however, Will's father plays a more significant role, functioning as Will's coach for the chess tournament he enters. Subsequently, both parents (but particularly Will's mom) play important roles in the transformation of his feelings about Tabby. In general, they are portrayed as loving, mostly free spirited but sometimes firm non-disciplinarians who are ultimately unconditionally there when their children need them.



BT's Dad

BT's dad is also something of a free spirit - in fact, as much of a free spirit as his son. Unpredictable, spontaneous, and therefore seeming to be a lot of fun, he is something of a father figure, offering somewhat unlikely hints of perhaps unexpected wisdom to Will in times of doubt and uncertainty. His influence disappears from Will's life, and therefore from the narrative, just as it (that influence) is becoming both interesting and valuable - a structural decision that can be seen as making room for the influence of Will's real parents.

Korbet Finn

Korbet is a five year old neighbor of the Tuppence family with an unshakable crush on Tabby. His surprising (passionate?) obsession is something of a joke to Will, until he realizes that it's less an obsession than it is persistence and faith, two manifestations of feeling that, as the result of conversation with Korbet, Will realizes have been missing from his relationship with / pursuit of Mi Su.

Rob Vandemeer, Danny Riggs

These two characters are boys at school with whom Mi Su spends some time and of whom, as a result, Will becomes quite jealous. Rob plays the leading role in the high school musical that Mi Su becomes involved in, while Danny is the boy who asks her to the Valentine's Day dance. Neither relationship is particularly deep or lasting, but both relationships, simply because they exist, trigger upset and Will and, subsequently, realizations of how much and how deeply he feels for Mi Su.

Aunt Nancy

Aunt Nancy comes to take care of Tabby when Will and his parents are at the chess tournament. She is the one who discovers Tabby after her accident on Dead Man's Hill, and who takes Tabby to the hospital.

Dr. Fryman

Dr. Fryman is the physician who takes care of Tabby after her accident.

Margaret (Betsy) and Andrew Tuppence

Betsy and Andrew are Will's great grandparents, missionaries who, shortly after their marriage, went to Africa to be missionaries and left their wedding gifts behind (see "Objects/Places - The Wedding Presents"). Late in the narrative, the discovery that Margaret was actually known as Betsy triggers, in Will, a surge of excitement and

freedom that causes him to rip open the wedding presents and eventually, to feel a surge of warm, brotherly, loving feeling towards Tabby.

Jim

The character of Jim appears only once in the narrative, in what amounts to its prologue. It is Jim, a science-obsessed neighbor, who introduces the younger Will to the idea of the indestructible proton, a concept that lays the foundation for Will's beliefs about the universe that, for the rest of the narrative are challenged by relationships and other circumstances.



Objects/Places

Protons

Protons are among the smallest units of matter in existence. Originally believed to be indestructible, the discovery that they can cease to exist triggers self-doubt and increasing fear in protagonist Will Tuppence.

Proton Decay

Proton decay is the name given to the process by which the physical existence of protons slowly, over long periods of time, comes to an end. The physical integrity of the proton breaks down until finally it disintegrates into pure energy.

Will's House

The house where Will and his family live has four stories, one of which (the dormer attic) is the setting for several important encounters.

The Dormer Attic

The top floor of the Tuppence family home is an open attic with dormer windows looking out onto the family's yard and the front sidewalk. This room is where Will goes to retreat from the pestering of his sister, and to think. This is also where the so-called "wedding presents" are kept.

The Wedding Presents

Several years ago, Will's recently married great grandparents left to do missionary work in Africa before they could open their wedding gifts. Originally planning to stay only a short time, they ended up living most of their lives there, with Will's great grandfather actually dying there and his great grandmother saying, when she returned home, that she didn't feel right opening them without her husband. So, they've stayed unopened in the dormer attic for generations ...

Dead Man's Hill

Early in the narrative, Will learns that BT has ridden his skateboard down Dead Man's Hill which, up to that point, had been viewed by almost everyone (at least everyone at school) as impossibly dangerous. This triggers envy and a bit of anger in Will, feelings that deepen when he learns that BT and Mi Su have kissed. Later in the narrative, Dead



Man's Hill is the setting for the accident that puts Tabby in the hospital, an accident which, it seems, was triggered by Tabby trying to emulate the most important male teenager in her life who Will thinks is BT but later realizes is himself. Dead Man's Hill is also the setting for this realization, and for the action Will takes as a result - kicking his skateboard down the hill and, at the same time, starting to banish his fear.

The French Creek Star Party

On a clear winter night, the amateur astronomers of the town where Will and his friends live gather with their telescopes to look at the stars. It is during this star party that Mi Su and BT kiss, and that Will is distracted from a chance to look at an astronomical phenomenon he has longed to see by his bratty little sister.

Will's Watch, Trophy and Skateboard

These three possessions are extremely important to Will - the incredibly precise "atomic" watch he gets for Christmas, the trophy he wins for being chess champion, and his skateboard (Black Viper). Throughout the narrative, Tabby plays with each item in spite of being warned away from them by Will, her actions at first seen by him to be deliberately irritating but which he later learns are, in fact, efforts to lovingly emulate him.

Monopoly

Playing the board game Monopoly (in which characters move around a gaming board purchasing real estate and competing to accumulate the most cash) is a regular weekly feature of the friendship between Will, Mi Su and BT. Changes in their traditions of how they play are seen by Will as clues to changes in the relationships between all three.

Ozzie the Octopus

Tabby's favorite stuffed toy conceals a secret. This is a collection of Will's favorite jelly beans that is a manifestation of Tabby's love for her brother and therefore destined to be a surprise gift sometime in the future.

The Brimley Clock

In the center of the town square is a tower named after a noteworthy citizen. In that tower is a clock that, according to Will's narration, has kept perfect time for as long as he can remember but which has started to slow down, which he believes is a result of its mechanisms being altered by BT. The clock is an important manifestation of the narrative's thematic interest in the changeable nature of time.



First Day, the Pebble

The elementary school in Will's community has a tradition in which children starting first grade are ceremonially walked into their new school by older members of their family, preferably siblings. As part of the ceremony, those older siblings pass on to the younger children the pebbles that they (the older children) were given when they went through their first day. The celebration of First Day marks, for Will and Tabby, an important turning point in their relationship.

Granny Smith Apple Pie

Several times throughout the narrative, Will refers to his mother making a pie out of tart Granny Smith apples, a pie he loves both the smell and the taste of, defining both as some of the great things in life. Later in the narrative, he realizes that Tabby's eyes are the color of Granny Smith apples, drawing a metaphoric connection between the family love as represented by the pie and the similar kind of love he is beginning to feel towards his baby sister.



Themes

The Nature of Time

Ideas about the nature of time, its changeability and mystery, appear several times and in several ways throughout the narrative. The first relates to Will's perceptions of the Brimley clock, which he remembers as always keeping perfect time but which, over the course of the narrative, begins to noticeably slow, a situation believed by Will to be the result of meddling by BT. The second relates to his own impeccably accurate watch, regulated by a signal from the unchangeable Atomic Clock but which, as Will discovers, is useless when it comes to predicting how long Tabby will be in hospital. The third relates to the climactic "glimpse" across time, of the joy of his long-dead ancestors, Betsy and Andrew, and his simultaneous discover that the contents of the long-wrapped wedding presents can have meaning in the present.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are Will's discoveries about the proton, at one point, believed to be the smallest perceivable particle of matter. His first discovery, narrated in the prologue, is of its apparent indestructibility - that its physical existence would continue forever. As a result of this discovery, he comes to believe that at least some part of himself, the protons that make up his physical body (and in fact, the physical existence of all living things) will exist for all eternity. When he learns (at the beginning of the narrative proper on p. 7) that that the proton can, in fact, be destroyed and that he, along with the rest of the universe, will one day cease to exist, his beliefs about himself and the natures of both time and forever undergo a sudden, life changing transformation.

The Nature of Friendship

Will begins the narrative comfortably attached to the friendships he shares with Mi Su and BT. They are, in many ways, the most stable and trustworthy parts of his life (particularly when the unpredictable volatility and frustrating peskiness of his sister, and his parents' passivity in response to her, are taken into account). Over the course of the narrative, however, the stability of the three-way friendship is tested by a couple of factors - Will's growing frustration with BT's apparent passivity, Mi Su's apparent indulgence of that passivity, by his growing feelings of attraction for Mi Su. Ultimately, though, the biggest challenge to that friendship comes after Will sees Mi Su and BT kissing, a situation he experiences as a breach of trust and respect on both their parts. That breach is to some degree healed when Mi Su reacts with compassion to Will's expression of his feelings towards her and his reactions when he perceives those feelings as not returned. The biggest healing of the breach comes when both Mi Su and BT reach out to Will and his family in the aftermath of Tabby's accident, their actions revealing that their feelings for him run more deeply and rely on a more fundamental human respect and connection than simply playing Monopoly and eating pizza. Here, the novel is apparently making the thematic suggestion that genuine friendship has less



to do with what one does with one's friends, and even less to do with how friends feel about you when times are good. The true nature of friendship, the novel contends, is indicated by the reactions of friends in times of difficulty, challenge, and stress.

The Nature of Love

While the narrative never does so in particular or explicit terms, another of its primary thematic concerns is an exploration of the nature of love. Those explorations manifest in several relationships. These include the parent/child relationship (both biological and, in the case of Will's relationship with BT's father, non-biological), the brother/sister relationship (primarily in the relationship between Will and Tabby, but also between BT and his younger twin sisters) and the husband/wife relationship (most notably in the relationship between Betsy and Andrew, Will's ancestors). There are also considerations of the love between friends (as manifest in the relationships between Will, Mi Su, and BT) and between boyfriend and girlfriend (as manifest in the relationships, or at least the beginning relationships, between Will, BT, and Mi Su). The overall sense in almost all these relationships is that love, genuinely felt and respectfully revealed, can transcend any and/or all complications and obstacles. These include emotional obstacles like the resentment Will feels towards BT and Mi Su (when he sees their relationship as threatening his potential relationship with Mi Su) and the resentment he feels towards his parents (for not supporting him in his "war" with Tabby). The novel also clearly portrays love as being an important factor in overcoming physical obstacles and challenges, such as those experienced by Tabby. Yes the novel makes the point that her coming out of her coma is, to some degree, the result of medical intervention. It also makes the even stronger point that it is more significantly connected to the offering of love and affection made to her by Will.

Overcoming Fear

Early in the narrative, Will enumerates a list of everything that makes him fearful. As the narrative unfolds, he has even more experiences and encounters that frighten him. These include the possibility that Mi Su will not notice and/or respond to his expressions of affection, the possibility that he will lose the chess tournament, and the possibility that his little sister will die. The biggest fear, though, that he faces is the result of the news he receives within the work's first fifteen pages. This is the knowledge that an important part of what he had happily come to believe about himself (i.e. that some part of him, because he is made of apparently indestructible protons, will continue to exist forever) is not, in fact true - that everything he is will ultimately come to an end. He comes to fear, in other (and more philosophical) words, that his life and existence will have no meaning whatsoever. This new fear drives him to take action - specifically, to pursue his relationship with Mi Su in the hopes that meaning will result. He and the reader come to learn, as the result of Will's experiences that meaning emerges from the real, moment to moment value an individual places on friendship and love (see "The Nature of Love" and "The Nature of Friendship" above) and that while fear exists, it can be overcome when both love and friendship are trusted, celebrated, and nourished.



Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first person and past tense point of view. The perspective is that of protagonist and narrator Will Tuppence who introduces the narrative with a brief prologue that essentially sets up why the rest of the narrative, and the events it portrays, are so important to him. From that point on, the action of the book is placed within the context of the moment in which he discovers that the fundamental truths he comes to believe in in that prologue, about himself and about existence in general, are essentially broken down into nothing. In other words, his narrative point of view is that of a young man struggling to redefine himself after being blindsided by the revelation that a fundamental truth of his identity is, in fact, a misconception.

In terms of the book's thematic point of view, there is the sense that its primary focus is an exploration of how negative emotions - fear, anger, resentment, jealousy - can be transcended if one opens oneself to more positive emotions - trust, love, acceptance, compassion. This point of view is explored and/or manifested in the author's portrayal of how Will transforms from someone whose relationship with the world is, in many ways, defined by those sorts of negative emotions into someone whose relationship with the world, and with people with whom he shares that world, is much more open, more relaxed and empathetic. This comes as the result of his opening himself to possibilities for positive feelings, rather than continuing to trap himself in negative ones.

Setting

The novel is set in modern-day America, the characters playing out their relationships within a context of what might be described as contemporary American youth culture. Skateboards, cell phones, and the Internet are all in evidence, as are parental attitudes (such as those exhibited by Will and Tabby's parents) that are, in many ways, themselves quite modern - specifically, a permissive attitude towards the sometimes very aggressive rebelliousness of children. There is also the sense that the action is set in a relatively urban location - not a huge metropolis like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, but a smaller city where there is still a sense of community, as opposed to the relative anonymity of the larger centers. This sense emerges from Will's comments about, for example, the town square and being able to see it from the window in the dormer attic, as well as the proximity of Dead Man's Hill and the relative ease with which Will and Mi Su travel to open spaces to see the stars. At this point, it's important to look at the big picture, the VERY big picture of the work's setting, the part that seems to have the most effect on the central character. This is the fact that the action takes place on Earth, this tiny speck of a planet in a near-infinite universe in which, for the most part, it doesn't really matter what any human being, ever, can do, think, or feel. In other words, the book's intergalactic setting has more of an impact on the protagonist than its earthly setting.



Language and Meaning

The language used in the novel is reflective of BOTH its settings. In terms of its earthly setting, the language used is that of feeling and sensation, of immediacy and identity. It's a place where things can be touched and trusted, protected and valued, seen, heard, and smelled. This is a place where reality is defined by the senses. This is in contrast to the language used in describing and/or discussing the book's larger context - that is, the placement of its characters and events within the realm of the wide universe. There, the language used is of infinity and expanse, or rather of the contrast between that infinity and expanse and the seemingly small and insignificant events on, as it has been described more than once, the little blue marble with all the water. Will's sometimes idiosyncratic way of describing himself, his friends, their situations and their relationships is reflective of his shifting awareness of that contrast, and his shifting feelings about that contrast - space is sometimes wonderful and sometimes terrifying. Here it's interesting to note that Will's narrative language similarly shifts between excited and fearful even when he's talking about his earthly situations. He is living a microcosmic life within what he discovers is a macrocosmic system and, at times, on macrocosmic terms, as he comes to realize that in the context of the universe as a whole (of which he is sometimes fearful), the things he's worried about don't really matter. Contemplating the universe and on some level, relating to it, helps him to contemplate and on some very important levels, relate to his life.

Structure

The novel's structure is fundamentally linear and straightforward, traditional and almost archetypal. Event follows event, cause follows effect, action follows reaction, energy and feeling build on energy and feeling towards a climax, or point of highest emotional intensity - in this case, the crisis of feeling and belief that surges in Will in the aftermath of Tabby's accident.

Meanwhile, and as discussed above, it's important to note that the book opens with what might best be described as a prologue, a short description of a turning point in Will's life (the apparent indestructibility of the proton) which becomes a key part of his fundamental identity. Following the prologue, the rest of the narrative is broken down into a day by day recounting of what happens to Will once he learns that that aspect of himself and his belief systems is no longer valid. He learns that the proton can be destroyed, and as a result of what he learns, the sense of personal values and self-worth that he had built around/for himself begins to breakdown. The rest of the narrative focuses on what happens to / for Will once that breakdown takes place, each day defined by its the distance in time from the day the breakdown happened. The main body of the story is essentially a day-by-day recounting of how Will moves further away emotionally and philosophically from both his old beliefs, and from the shock and fear that surged in him when he found out those beliefs were no longer valid. He does this, the book's structure suggests, in the same way as he is moving away chronologically (in terms of time) from the shocking moment. In short, style (structure) is defined by

substance (emotional content/movement) in the same way as structure supports, sustains, and helps define that substance.



Quotes

"Finally he said it, one word: 'Protons.' I had heard people say 'amen' in that tone of voice" (p. 3).

"My dad remembers exactly what he was doing the moment he heard that Elvis died. For my mother, it was Princess Di. It will be that way with me and the proton" (p. 7).

"As usual, Mi-Su and I went on with the game, but something was different. The squares on the board seemed to float under my little silver top hat. BT had done Dead Man's Hill, and Mi-Su knew something I didn't, and the proton was dead" (p. 24).

"Funny thing, nobody questioned whether it was true or not. Nobody said maybe BT made the whole thing up. Everybody knows BT doesn't lie. If you don't care about consequences, about anything, you don't have to lie. And it's not like he did Dead Man's Hill for the Glory. If that were true, he would have had witnesses. He just did it for the same reason he does everything else - he felt like it" (p. 25).

"When I looked at the sun, my eyes were crossing 93 million miles of space. But my feet wouldn't cross another inch" (p. 30).

"Ninety-three million miles of space in front of me, and every inch of it seemed packed with the things I was afraid of: high places, cramped places, dark places, thousand-leggers, speed, flying, death, change, time, pain, failure, criticism, roller coasters, train tracks, being wrong, being smelly, being late, being stupid, being rejected, black mambos, leeches, hantavirus, losing, deep water, uncertainty, being buried alive, being caught being afraid, myself" (p. 31).

"...are angels made of protons? Is heaven? If so, does this mean they won't last forever? And what exactly is Heaven, anyway? A thing? A place? I don't think so. I mean, if I could look at a map of creation, there wouldn't be a sign saying 'Heaven - This Way.' My opinion? Heaven is a dimension, like time. Like up and down. I think" (p. 40).

"This was a place for stars, not people. A show. No button to click, no ticket to buy. Lean in to an eyepiece. Or just look up. The sky! It's been there all along!" p. 52

"... it's not true that the Horsehead isn't going anywhere. Actually, it's flying away at thousands of miles a second. Everything is. The Brimley clock. Mi Su's smile. My mother's Granny Smith apple pie. We live in a silent explosion. Everything is flying away from everything else - flying away - flying away" (p. 67).

"You're a kid trying to figure out the world you were born into, that's all. And I got news for you - you're no nuttier than me." p. 85 - Mr. Bontempo.

"I wonder if it was anything like BT's plunge down Dead Man's Hill: off the edge of self-control and down the slippery slope of my own words. Scary. Wouldn't do it again. But kind of OK with having done it that once." p. 97



"...by ignoring my bad behavior he throws it back in my face. Because he refuses to care about ANYTHING. How do you deal with somebody who can't be insulted?" p. 98

"All the usual little things ... seemed a little different, dipped in glitter, like this is our last Saturday-night Monopoly game before the world changes - again." p. 111

"I'm going to chicken out. I know it. I'm terrified ... I can't do it. I don't like not knowing what comes after ... In chess, you don't make a move until you know how your opponent will counter. I'm going to chicken out!" p. 114

"This time a week before, I had pictured her sitting in the movie beside me, maybe my arm around her, or holding hands, in our own little world. And now they were outside, the two of them, together, and I was inside, alone. How did it happen? Have I been kidding myself all this time? Have she and BT had a thing going all this time and I was just too dumb to see it?" p. 134

"I feel like I'm playing chess in water. The pieces keep floating away. I don't know where things are. I can't figure out tomorrow." p. 140

"How many have died since then across the universe? Are dying protons like roaches: for every one you see there's a hundred behind the wall? How many need to die before it starts to show? Before steel becomes transparent? And people? Ghost world. I feel a twitch. A blip. Was that a tiny flash inside of me? Is my liver down one proton from yesterday?" p. 163

"After three or four days of this, I'll hardly be able to tell it from a memory, it will be so real. In fact, the looking forward will be so much fun that when Saturday finally comes, I'll probably wish I had another week to think about it. I'll carry my thoughts around with me like soda in a cup, sipping through a straw whenever I feel like a taste: during class, on my skateboard, lying down to sleep, especially then." p. 168

"How could some other guy know her well enough to ask her to the dance and me not even know about him? I racked my brain, trying to remember her ever saying his name before. Who did he think he was? Didn't he know we grew up together? ... Didn't he know that his dance date, the dazzling Miss Mi Su Kelly, kissed me - me! - on Valentine's night? And again just last Sunday, only one short week ago?" p. 175

"I couldn't help staring at him. This little survivor. He took incredible abuse from Tabby and still kept coming back. No visible scars, no limp in his personality. Going with the flow. How did he do it? Was it his age, or did he have something I didn't have?" p. 178

"I don't want to go. I hope I get sick. I'm losing and I'm sad and I'm grumpy and the rooks and pawns keep looking up at me, like, 'So what's the next move, dummy?' and I'm NOT over it and Tabby was pounding on the door ..." p. 186

"I'm aching for the old days, before the star party and the kisses and the complications, before the tiny flying flashes, when we were all just friends and the biggest problem on Saturday nights was how many hotels to build on Park Place". p. 188



"You are truly focused when you're so focused that you don't know you're focused. I wasn't seeing trophies. I wasn't seeing the crowd ... I wasn't even seeing pawns and rooks and bishops. I was seeing the board. The whole board. Everything. That's the key, to see it all, to see the patterns, the pitfalls, the possibilities. To blinder your brain ... until your whole universe is the ... checkered chessboard in front of you." p. 192.

"Time itself had gone into hyperdrive. All was accelerating. Protons were swarming in the dormer, swarming and flashing out of existence by the billions, lighting up the wedding gifts. And somehow I knew that if I walked up those stairs and opened the door and went in, I'd never come back down again." p. 206

"It told me the time. It told me the month, day and year. It didn't tell me what was going to happen to my sister. I walked, walked. I could no longer see the whole board, only my own dark square." p. 206 - 2.

"I don't know how long I sat there, staring at the jelly beans, at the gutted octopus. The horizontal world I had thought I occupied was tilting, dumping me somewhere else, somewhere new. I carefully replaced the container in the octopus and returned to the hospital." p. 219

"I ran through neighborhoods, other lives, other worlds. Solipsism. A man on his lawn more. Green and yellow. A high-school kid with earphones, washing his car, suds creeping down the driveway. High in the bright blue sky the moon showed like a fading fingerprint. It seemed so weak, so out of place, as if it stumbled into broad daylight by mistake. Unseen protons dying by the billions." p. 224

"I saw them, Betsy and Andrew Tuppence, dashing down to the pier, the huge ship foghorning HURRY! HURRY! Her shoes in her hands, wedding dress flashing white, a swan taking off, Andrew calling "Wait!", the two of them laughing - laughing - all the way to Africa ..." p. 235

"It's enough to know who we are today, this minute, and who we are right now are two good friends, as good as friends get, smiling at each other across the jannering little heads and not giving a rat's lugnut that the world is vanishing one proton at a time." p. 246

"... the clock on the Brimley tower is now three hours behind and I haven't seen a tiny flash in months and Tabby wears a Granny apple dress and a Granny apple ribbon in her hair and shoes and socks of the purest white I've ever seen and she's squeezing my finger like there's no tomorrow and she's here and she's now and so am I and that's all there is ..." p. 247



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the relationships between Will's various experiences of time. What is the common thread between all these experiences? How does this common thread relate to his other thematically significant discoveries about the nature of love, the nature of friendship, and overcoming fear?

What are your experiences with friendship? What are some of the most important friendships in your life? How have they changed you? How have they challenged you? How have you navigated changes in those relationships?

In "Smiles to Go," suffering and conflict is transformed into healing and respect as the result of the characters coming to a deeper, more compassionate understanding of and relationship with love. Discuss an incident and/or situation in which an expression of love and affection made a difficult situation easier or transformed a relationship into a positive one.

Discuss how characters other than Will experience fear and overcome it. Your considerations should include, but not be limited to, the characters of Tabby, Korbit, and Will's mother.

Describe a situation in which you were particularly fearful - perhaps a situation associated with the potential loss of a friendship, a family member, or status at school. Fear entered and challenged a relationship. How did that fear manifest? What did it make you do? What did you do in response to that fear? How did you overcome it? How did it change you?

In what ways does Will's awareness of his size, in relation to that of the universe, contribute to his relationship with his fears?

When you think about yourself, your life, your problems, and your joys in relationship to the larger universe, both the planet earth and the universe itself, do you feel unique and special or irrelevant and pointless? Discuss how you came to arrive at that perception.

What do you think is the relationship between the title of the prologue, "Unsmashable" and the rest of the book? What about Will, for example, is "unsmashable?" What do you think about other characters or their situations? What relationship does the title have to any of the work's themes?

What do you think is the metaphoric relationship between the various flashes of light perceived by Will and his experiences of the rest of his life - specifically, what he believes the flashes mean and how that meaning relates to other important aspects of his life. Consider particularly his relationships with BT and Mi Su.



Research and analyze the poem "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening". What, do you think, is the poem's meaning for BT? What do you think he meant by changing the final words from "miles to go before I sleep" to "miles to go before I weep?"