

Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You Study Guide

**Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You by Peter
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Plot Summary

Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You is a novel by writer Peter Cameron. In this novel, James Sveck has recently graduated from high school and is expected to attend Brown University in the fall. However, James finds himself dreaming of buying a house in the Midwest where he can live out his life in quiet solitude. An anti-social person by choice, James makes a number of missteps in his attempts to become independent, creating a situation in which nothing seems to work out as James had thought it would. Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You is a novel of self-exploration, of one teenager dealing not only with the perils of an uncharted future, but with the trauma of a past that he cannot face.

James Sveck works in his mother's art gallery where he spends the majority of his day with too much time on his hands. James' immediate supervisor, John Webster, is an attractive gay man who often uses the computers at work to search for a companion on dating sites. When James stumbles across this website and John's profile, he creates a profile of a fake person who is exactly what John is looking for. It is no surprise when John responds to this fake profile immediately. However, John is terribly hurt and angry when he discovers that his new, perfect mate is really his teenage employee.

Embarrassed by what he has done, James goes to visit the only person he believes understands him - his grandmother. James tells his grandmother that he does not want to go to college because he cannot stand the idea of being surrounded by people his own age. James' grandmother is more diplomatic than his parents and suggests alternatives for his future, but James does not like any of her suggestions. Instead, James dreams of buying a house in the Midwest where he can live out his life in relative seclusion. However, even this dream seems unattainable when James calls a real estate agent in Indiana and dislikes what she has to say.

As James continues to struggle with his desire not to attend school, he begins to reflect on an event that happened to him several months ago. James was invited to attend a prestigious conference in Washington D.C. for high school students who had written outstanding essays on government. James' essay was meant as a joke, but it was taken quite seriously. James did not want to go on the trip, but found himself pushed into it by school administrators and his parents.

On the trip to Washington D.C., James finds that he is expected to share a room with two other boys. James immediately feels out of place and as though he is suffocating without the ability to have time to himself. For this reason, James walks out of a dinner theater event he is attending with some of the other students. James does not intend to leave, but finds himself walking too far from the theater to return safely. James checks into a hotel and spends several days in a local museum. When James is finally caught by the police, he has a breakdown.

James begins to see a therapist after his experiences in Washington D.C., but he finds the therapist annoying and her methods unproductive. However, James is surprised

when the therapist asks him about September 11, 2001. James' school was close to the tragedy in New York City and he saw a great deal of the events of that day. The therapists questions suggest that James' current problems stem from his experiences that day.

James visits his grandmother again and is surprised to find her sleeping. James' grandmother tells him that she will be leaving all her belongings to him with the exception of her house when she dies. James is surprised and touched by this. When his grandmother dies months later while James is away at Brown University, he has her things placed in storage for future use.

Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

The novel takes place in the year 2003. Most of the events in the novel take place in a single week in July of 2003, but the narrator takes the reader back to the spring of 2003 several times to describe the events surrounding a trip to Washington D.C. and the subsequent visits with a therapist.

In Chapter 1, James is at home with his sister Gillian when their mother returns unexpectedly from her honeymoon. James' mother has been married before, this being her third marriage. James' mother has returned without her new husband, suggesting that something has gone wrong, but James is unaware of what this might be at this point. James calls his boss at his mother's art gallery, John Webster, who closed the gallery in the owner's absence because of a lack of patronage, to warn him of his mother's return.

James leaves the apartment to give his mother some space and recalls when he and his family first moved to this apartment after his parents' marriage failed due to his father's infidelity. When James later returns to the apartment, he learns that his mother came home early because her new husband stole her credit cards and bank account information to gamble away more than three thousand dollars. James spends the rest of the evening in his room looking at houses for sale in the Midwest. James' mother stops by to say goodnight and they talk briefly about her relationship with her latest husband, Mr. Rogers.

In Chapter 2, James goes to work the next day. The gallery showcases the art of an artist who refuses to be referred to by a name. This artist creates art out of garbage cans. There are rarely any visitors to the gallery. James spends most of his day bringing John food and drinks. That Friday, James has lunch with his father. James tells his father he does not want to go to Brown University, but would instead like to take the money they would have spent on tuition and use it as a down payment for a house in the Midwest. James' father thinks this is a joke. James' father then asks James if he is gay, but James refuses to answer. James' father then confesses that he is having plastic surgery done on his eyes that weekend because he feels the bags under his eyes make him look unattractive.

In Chapter 3, in April, James was invited to The American Classroom, an event in Washington D.C. where two students from each state is invited to attend a conference to celebrate government. Each student is invited based on an essay they wrote. James thought his essay was a joke, but it was chosen over many others. James took the train to Washington and considered skipping the event by not revealing himself to the Congressman's wife who was meeting the arriving students. However, James changed his mind and joined the group. James was disappointed to find they would be staying in

a small motel a distance from the heart of the city and he would have to share a room with two other male students. It was an uncomfortable situation from the beginning.

In Chapter 4, when James returns to the gallery, he finds that John had been using his computer in the gallery. James pushes the back button on the browser and discovers that James had been viewing his own profile on a gay dating site. James decides to create a profile for a man who would fit John's perfect date. When James is done, a German couple come in to view the garbage cans. Later, James walks home with his mother and tells her he does not want to go to college. Like his father, James' mother seems to think he is joking. Later that night, James runs into his sister and her married lover, one of her college professors. James tells them his plan to buy a house instead of attending school and the college professor is supportive of the idea.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The first chapter of this novel introduces James, the narrator, and members of his family. James is a new high school graduate who is expected to attend Brown University in the fall. James works at his mother's art gallery because she wanted him to have a job for the summer and implies that she did not expect him to find a job anywhere else. This implies to the reader that James is a child of privilege who has little experience in the real world, including what it takes to get a job independent of his family. It also suggests a certain amount of naivety in James.

James' mother is a twice divorced woman who recently returned from her honeymoon when her third husband stole money from her. This unstable romantic history suggests that James' mother is a woman who is lonely and open to relationships that might not be suitable to her lifestyle or personality. It also suggests that James' mother was deeply wounded by her first husband's infidelity and the end of their marriage.

James' sister is a vulnerable young woman who thinks she is mature, but is really simply modeling the behaviors of those admires. This suggests that Gillian is just as gullible and naive as James. John is an older man who is highly educated, but clearly as lonely as is James' mother. James shows a certain interest in John, but the reader wonders if this is a sexual interest, or just a young, lonely man trying to connect with someone he admires.

In this set of chapters, James begins to introduce a trip he took to Washington, D.C. in April. From the way James introduces this trip, it is clear that something significant happened during it, but the reader is unclear what that might be. However, it is clear that this event is important and it might explain some of James' behaviors, such as his desire to buy a house in the Midwest rather than attend Brown University.

Chapters 5-9

Chapters 5-9 Summary

In Chapter 5, in May of that year, James was advised by his school counselor that he should begin seeing a therapist due to his behavior in Washington, D.C. A short time later, James' mother told him that his father had chosen a therapist for him. James went to see his therapist, Rowena Adler, at her office on First Avenue and was disappointed with the cluttered little space. James was obstinate during the first meeting, correcting Dr. Adler's speech and complaining about her habit of answering a question with a question. Dr. Adler scheduled James to see her twice a week.

In Chapter 6, James takes the train to visit his grandmother in Hartsdale. Over coffee, James tells his grandmother he does not want to go to Brown University because he cannot stand the idea of spending so much time with people his own age. James' grandmother is supportive, discussing with him the pros and cons of school and his plan to move to the Midwest.

In Chapter 7, on James' second visit to Dr. Adler, he finds her downtown office more pleasant. They discussed the reasons why James' parents decided to send him to a therapist and briefly the connection between his visits to Dr. Adler and his behavior in Washington, D.C. As they talked, they continued to have a battle of the wits over the words Dr. Adler chose to use and the way she phrased her questions.

In Chapter 8, in June, Dr. Adler pushed the question of what happened in Washington, D.C.

In Chapter 9, James began to tell Dr. Adler the story of the events in Washington, D.C. by describing briefly the first few days of the conference and his growing sense of suffocation and loneliness. One night the students were to have a night of entertainment during which they were to either go to a comedy club or dinner theater. When James learned that some of the students would be going to the symphony, he wanted to go but learned this choice is only for those who object to the comedy club or dinner theater on grounds of morality.

At the dinner theater, James sat alone by choice. The dinner was boring and the first act of the play unentertaining. During intermission, another student came to speak to James and invited him to her table. James refused, with the idea that she was showing him pity. However, James quickly realized she was only being kind.

James decided he needed some fresh air and told one of the chaperones he was going for a walk. James wandered into a residential neighborhood and found himself looking into the window of a house where a woman and a man were playing a board game. Drawn by fascination in this unusual activity, James watched for a time. Then James realized it was not a husband and wife, but a mother and her mentally disabled son.

They seemed to see him, so James left. On the street, James was spotted by a neighborhood watch participant and ran to catch a bus in fear that he would be arrested for peeping in windows.

Chapters 5-9 Analysis

In these chapters, James visits his grandmother, the only person he feels he can talk to and who understands him. His grandmother does appear to understand James in a way his parents and sister do not, but even she cannot give him the answers he seems to want.

James begins to share with the reader what happened the previous spring when he went to a prestigious conference in Washington, D.C. James is naturally an anti-social person, therefore sharing so much time with other kids his age is difficult for him. Eventually James finds himself unable to stand it any longer even though the other kids are being fairly kind and understanding with him. James walks away and finds himself spying on a woman and her son who are playing a board game. James finds this normal scene to be highly unusual, perhaps illustrating James' growing dissociation with normality.

James has been seeing a therapist. James is highly intelligence and he uses this intelligence to hide from his emotions, battling with the therapist over her word choices and the way she asks questions rather than allowing her too close, to allow her to explore the emotional chaos that has brought James to her. It is a trick that the therapist must recognize and she is patient with him, continuing to battle with him in her attempts to help him.

Chapters 10-13

Chapters 10-13 Summary

In Chapter 10, in June, Dr. Adler pushed James to continue his story of the events in Washington, D.C. After some reluctance, James told Dr. Adler how he checked into a hotel, but was afraid to disrupt anything there. The next day, James saw a small article in the paper about his disappearance, but it did not make him want to return to The American Classroom. Instead, James spent the day at the National Gallery where he found himself studying Thomas Coles' *The Voyage of Life*, paintings he had once found profound, then embarrassing. While studying the paintings, James began to cry, calling attention to himself. When a guard tried to restrain him, James had a panic attack and put a hole in the wall. Police were called, James was recognized, and his father came to take him home.

In Chapter 11, on Monday, James is at work when John begins to instant message him through the dating site. James does not know what to do at first, but then begins to talk back. Eventually John asks James on a date that evening and James agrees. That night, when James arrives at the party John has invited him to, John is shocked to see him and tries to make him leave. James then tells John why he is there. John tells James to leave. When James leaves, John follows him and explains just how angry he really is and why.

In Chapter 12, when James gets home, he finds Mr. Rogers packing his things. Mr. Rogers is visibly upset and he tries to explain to James why he did what he did. However, James' mother wants Mr. Rogers gone and James never really liked him, so he does nothing to soothe his hurt feelings. When James' mother and sister come home later, James tells his mother about Mr. Rogers' visit. After his mother goes to bed, Gillian comes in and tries to talk James into going to college, telling him that his mother has promised to make their father buy her a Mini Cooper if she can make him promise to go. James refuses.

In Chapter 13, John does not come to work the next day. James calls a realtor in Indiana about a house he likes, but the conversation does not go well and he discovers that the ad fails to mention several important things, such as the dump about to be built across the street from the house. As James ends the phone call, an art reporter speaks to him about the garbage cans. Later, she writes a scathing piece on the artist and his art.

On that same afternoon, James visits with Dr. Adler. Dr. Adler asks James if he wants to talk about September 11, 2001. James is surprised by this direct question, but does not see what it has to do with him until Dr. Adler points out that his classroom was near Ground Zero and he must have seen some awful things that day. James mentions how he became obsessed in the weeks after the terrorist attacks when he read about a

woman that no one knew was missing until weeks later when her apartment was found empty and her bird dead.

Chapters 10-13 Analysis

James completes his story of what happened in Washington, D.C. James seems to think that those events were nothing important, but the reader learns that he had a panic attack in the National Gallery while viewing paintings on the different stages of life. These paintings were once very important to James and they seem to continue to have some meaning to him that he does not fully understand at this point in his life. James appears as an immature, gullible young man, but it is beginning to become clear that James has suffered some traumatic event that makes him question his own mortality and his own place in the world. Perhaps it is this traumatic event that is behind James' anti-social behaviors and his desire to disappear in the Midwest rather than further his education among students his own age.

James responds to instant messages from John and pretends to be the young man whose profile he created for John. They make a date and James actually shows up, telling John the truth of what he has done. The reader is unsure if James was hoping for a romantic connection with John or if he was simply trying to reach out to someone he admires. It seems James is simply trying to make some sort of emotional connection with someone other than his family members, but he has failed badly.

James' desires and dreams appear to begin falling apart around him. First he loses what little connection he once had with John and then his dream of a house in the Midwest begins to fall apart when he learns that the perfect houses he sees on the Internet are not always the reality. It seems that the careful solitary world that James has created for himself is quickly beginning to dissolve.

When Dr. Adler mentions September 11, 2001, the reader realizes how recent that event is to James and his family. When Dr. Adler suggests that James' school was close enough for him to see some of the horror of that day, it begins to explain some of James' behaviors and perhaps the motives behind his anti-social behavior. James is a survivor who has not dealt with the overwhelming emotions that have left him scarred after such a traumatic event. It is suddenly clear to the reader that one did not have to lose a family member or be a victim of the actual attack to be a victim of what those terrorists did to the city of New York on that day. James is a perfect example of this.

Chapters 14-17

Chapters 14-17 Summary

In Chapter 14, James stops at home for a drink and runs into Gillian. It turns out that Gillian's had a bad day and wants to complain. Gillian then tells James that his roommate from Brown University is in town and wants to meet him. James refuses to call the man back because he still does not wish to go to Brown University. When James returns to the gallery, his mother calls him into her office. John has called the gallery and announced that he will not return as long as James is there. James' mother tells him she has no choice but to fire James because she cannot run the gallery without John. James' mother tells him to return to work, but he is angry and decides to leave.

In Chapter 15, James goes to his grandmother's house and is shocked to find her in bed asleep in the middle of the afternoon. James sits in a chair and watches his grandmother sleep for several hours. When his grandmother wakes, they go downstairs to have a drink. James' grandmother tells him how naps were frowned on by her father and she is embarrassed to be caught napping, but she has been especially tired lately. James' grandmother then makes them dinner. They discuss James' options should he decide not to attend Brown University. Later, when James is preparing to go to bed, his grandmother tells him that when she dies the house will be sold, but that she is leaving all her possessions to him.

In Chapter 16, the next morning, James returns to the city early so that his mother will not be worried about him. However, when he returns home, James discovers that his mother did not even know he was missing the night before. Gillian did not miss him either because she is wrapped up in her own drama. It seems her married lover has decided to commit himself to his marriage. James' mother rehires him, telling him that John has decided that he overreacted to the whole thing. Then Jordan calls, James' roommate at Brown University, and he finds himself forced to speak to him.

In Chapter 17, it is October. James is at Brown University, though he is not enjoying it. James' grandmother has passed away. James takes the little bit of money his grandmother left him and rented a large storage container to keep it all, even the magazines, despite his parents objections.

Chapters 14-17 Analysis

James is fired from the gallery by his mother and turns to the only person he feels truly close to, his grandmother. James finds his grandmother sleeping. This is very much against his grandmother's personality, but it fails to concern James as much as it does his grandmother.

James is contacted by his future roommate at Brown University and he refuses to speak to him. However, it appears once his mother and sister force him to talk to the boy he

changes his mind about Brown University and everything he has been dreading about it. At the same time, James learns about the struggles in his mother and sister's lives, coming to the conclusion that they are so consumed with their own troubles that they do not even notice his. In a way, this is a moment of growth for James, but at the same time it is a telling revelation that allows the reader the final step in understanding how James has become the person he is. However, when the reader learns that James has gone to Brown University after all, it seems that James will continue to struggle, but he will eventually find his way.

Characters

James Sveck

James Sveck is the narrator of the novel. James is a newly graduated high school student who is expected to go to Brown University in the fall. James is very anti-social and he prefers the idea of buying a house in the Midwest to attending a school with a large number of students his own age. James' family does not like this idea and each tries in their own way to talk James into attending Brown.

James' parents are divorced, his mother thrice divorced as the novel progresses. James has a fairly good relationship with both his parents despite lingering tensions from their marriage. However, James resents their concern on a certain level and resists their attempts to help him deal with his emotional behaviors.

James has had a panic attack while he was attending a special conference in Washington, D.C. that his therapist seems to think is related to his lingering feelings regarding the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001. James begins to face these emotions, but makes only small amounts of progress as the novel reaches its conclusion.

Gillian Sveck

Gillian Sveck is James' sister. Gillian is a college student who is gullible and allows herself to model the behaviors of those she admires, especially her language professor. Gillian and James are not particularly close as Gillian is self-centered and seems to be most concerned with her own problems. However, Gillian is only one of a few that James feels comfortable around and sharing his feelings with. Gillian too seems concerned enough about James that she does offer some advice about college to him.

John Webster

John Webster is a well-educated man who runs an art gallery for James' mother. John is a gay man who would very much like to meet a man who fits a specific profile. James stumbles onto John's profile on a gay dating web site and he decides to create a profile matching what John wants in a man. James does this in an attempt to connect on a higher level with someone he admires greatly. However, this trick backfires and appears to damage their relationship beyond repair. By the end of the book, though, it seems John has come around and will eventually forgive James.

Marjorie Dunfour, James' Mother

James' mother is a lonely woman who was deeply wounded by her first divorce and has had two more failed marriages in an attempt to fill the emptiness in her life. James' mother is also an unfocused, unhappy business woman who chooses a career that is doomed to make her no money and make her a laughing stock in a close knit social group. James' mother is in the middle of the failure of her third marriage as the novel begins and therefore seems only marginally aware of the struggles taking place in her son's life. However, she also appears to be a caring mother who simply cannot see what is happening in her son's life.

Paul Sveck, James' Father

James' father left his marriage in order to be with a woman who later died of cancer. James' father has remained single since the death of his lover, suggesting he is a man who loves deeply and is not lonely enough to fill the emptiness with meaningless relationships. James' father is involved in his life as much as he can be when he does not live in the home. However, James' father is also vain and appears to be concerned with the things taking place in his own life over those in James' life despite his overtures of concern to his son.

James' Grandmother

James' grandmother is a kind old woman who grew up in a different era, with a strict father, who left her with certain opinions and habits that cause her daughter to see her as strict and unyielding. James' grandmother is the only person he feels he can be himself with, the only person who truly cares about him. James' grandmother gives him strong advice, though she allows him to make his own choices. For this reason, James is close to his grandmother and it is to him that she leaves her things when she dies.

Ranier Maria Schultz

Ranier Maria Schulz is Gillian's language professor and her lover. Ranier Maria is married to a woman who is aware of his relationship with Gillian and has a lover of her own. Ranier Maria is jaded about his career and tells James that he should not go to college if that is not where he truly wants to be. In the end, Ranier Maria recommits himself to his marriage and moves to California to follow his wife to a new job.

Jordan Powell or Howell

Jordan Powell, or Howell, is James' future roommate at Brown. Jordan calls James on several occasions in an attempt to visit him while he is in New York. Gillian is impressed with Jordan when she speaks to him on the phone and nearly bullies James into

speaking with him at the end of the novel. It appears that speaking with Jordan helps James to finally commit to attending Brown in the fall. Gillian fails to get Jordan's last name properly and cannot remember if it is Powell or Howell.

Mr. Rogers

Mr. Rogers is the third husband of James' mother. Mr. Rogers is not of the same social class as James' family, but he makes James' mother happy. However, on their honeymoon, Mr. Rogers steals her credit cards and bank information to gamble away several thousand dollars and spend additional money on other pursuits. James' mother immediately leaves Mr. Rogers and pursues a divorce.

Dr. Rowena Adler

Dr. Rowena Adler is James' therapist. Dr. Adler annoys James with her habit of answering questions with questions and refusing to argue with him over word choices and other mundane things. However, Dr. Adler is quite experienced at dealing with teenagers and she eventually convinces James to tell her about his panic attack in Washington, D.C. and his feelings regarding what he saw on September 11, 2001 during the terrorist attacks.

Objects/Places

Dating Site, Gent4Gent.com

James sees John's profile on a dating site and decides to create a profile that fulfills John's dreams of the perfect man.

Bank Cards

Mr. Roger's, the husband of James' mother, steals her bank cards on their honeymoon in Las Vegas in order to gamble. This causes James' mother to seek a divorce.

Thomas Coles' The Voyage of Life

Thomas Coles' The Voyage of Life is a collection of four paintings that show one man's voyage from birth to death. James was once fascinated by these paintings and it is while viewing these paintings in the National Gallery that James has his panic attack.

Art Gallery

James' mother owns an art gallery where she displays the art of an artist who refuses to be given a name and who creates art out of garbage cans.

National Gallery

The National Gallery is in Washington, D.C. This gallery is where James is found after wandering away from The American Classroom.

The American Classroom

The American Classroom is a conference for students in Washington, D.C. to teach the students about government. Each participant, two from each state, is chosen by writing an essay about government.

Grandmother's Things

James inherits the contents of his grandmother's house upon her death. Despite his parents' protest, James keeps everything, from magazines to records with the idea that he is too young to know what he might need in the future.



September 11, 2001

September 11, 2001 is the date on which terrorist flew commercial airplanes into the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York City, injuring and killing several thousand people. James witnessed this attack from his classroom and continues to have emotional difficulty as a result.

Brown

Brown is a prestigious university in Rhode Island. James has been accepted to Brown and expected to attend, but he tells everyone he would rather buy a house in the Midwest.

Washington, D.C.

James attends a conference on government in Washington, D.C. James begins to feel depressed and walks away from the conference only to have a panic attack in the National Gallery a few days later.

New York City

James and his family live in New York City and much of the novel is set there.

Themes

Self-Absorption

As this novel begins, James and his family appear to be a somewhat comical version of the normal American family. James' parents are divorced, his mother twice divorced, and his sister is having an affair with a college professor. While these things might have seemed somewhat outrageous years ago, it is common place in this modern world.

As the novel progresses, the reader sees James interact with the different members of his family. On the surface they all seem quite caring and involved in one another's lives. However, as the novel continues to develop, it quickly becomes clear that each family member is dealing with his or her own problems and these problems keep them from seeing what is going on with other members of the family.

In the modern world, it is often difficult for people to see things beyond their own problems, their own situations. To be a part of a family is to care how others feel. To be a part of a family is to move beyond your own problems to help others with theirs. In this novel, the author shows the reader how self-absorption sometimes causes families to fail to reach the intimacy that is important to help one another grow and deal with life's ups and downs.

Emotional Trauma

James is a slightly abnormal teenager in that he does not interact with others in a normal way. James struggles to make friends and to simply relate to the people around him. In fact, James reveals his inability to relate to others when he inadvertently hurts John's feelings by trying to create in himself the man he thinks John desires.

As the novel progresses, the reader begins to learn of other problems James has had. James had a panic attack while visiting Washington, D.C. as part of a prestigious program. Later, James sees a therapist, but refuses to speak to her about his problems until she threatens to stop allowing him to see her. It is clear that there is something James is hiding, something he is not dealing with that perhaps explains his anti-social behavior.

Toward the end of the novel, the reader finally learns that James had a front seat view of the events of September 11, 2001 from his classroom. It is clear that the events of that day have deeply scared James and left him with a fear of dying without anyone noticing. It is a difficult situation for James due to the fact that he was basically a loner before that day and the events of that day have caused him to feel deeply the impact of such behaviors in a way he has never felt before. So even as James expresses a desire to slip from this world unnoticed, he reaches out to others and he tries to overcome his anti-social behaviors.

Marriage

While marriage is not a theme that applies to the main character directly, it is something that impacts his life as he struggles to deal with the events taking place around. James' parents divorced when he was quite young, placing him in a position of spy for each of his parents. This is a situation that is difficult for James, making him choose between his parents, and leaving him forced to learn how to deal with the emotional demands of each parent.

At the same time James has had to deal with the divorce and subsequent relationship of his parents, he has watched his mother remarry and divorce. James makes subtle jokes about this mother's second and third marriages, but the reader knows that it must have been difficult for James to watch his mother struggle in these relationships, especially when he was so young. A child wants to make his parents happy and it is difficult for any child to see their mother struggle as James' mother has struggled.

Marriage is also an issue with James' sister, Gillian. Gillian is dating a man who is married to another woman. This situation shows Gillian's basic disregard for the sanctity of marriage and shows James that marriage is not sacred and does not truly matter in the long run. It is a sad example for a child such as James who continues to struggle with anti-social behaviors and in finding ways to reach out to people he wants to care about him. Perhaps the way in which his family has treated marriage is a significant reason why James is unable to create meaningful relationships.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator of this novel is James Sveck, a seventeen-year-old boy who is struggling with emotional trauma from what he saw on September 11, 2001. James tells his story both in a linear time line and with several flashbacks that help explain his emotional state to the reader.

The novel is written in the first-person point of view, giving the reader an intimate relationship with the main character of the novel. This intimacy allows the reader to know James in a way that they might not if the novel was written from a different point of view, especially when the reader considers James' anti-social behaviors. At the same time, the point of view allows the reader to know things about James that other character more than likely are not aware of or interested in. For these reasons, the point of view of this novel is appropriate to the plot.

Setting

The novel is set in New York City in July of 2003. This time period and location is of great importance to the plot of the novel when the reader realizes that James Sveck witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

The setting of the novel is not important to the novel at the beginning. The setting seems almost incidental as the narrator begins to tell his story. However, as the novel progresses and the reader learns more about James Sveck and his recent history, the setting of the novel begins to take on special meaning. In fact, the setting of the novel becomes something like another character in the novel, especially when the reader realizes that James' desire to move to the Midwest has a great deal to do with the attacks on the World Trade Center in September of 2001, two years previous to the time in which this novel is set. For this reason, the setting of this novel is of immense importance to the plot.

Language and Meaning

James Sveck is a highly intelligent young man. For this reason, much of the language in this novel is sophisticated. In fact, the main character often corrects the language skills of his therapist in this novel in an attempt to distract her from therapy.

The language of this novel is slightly more advanced than a reader might expect in a novel intended for a younger audience. However, the language supports the intelligence and background of the main character, presenting the reader with an authentic look at how such a young man might communicate with those around him. Hence the language of this novel works well with the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into seventeen chapters, ranging in length. The novel is told both in a linear time line and with multiple flashbacks. The novel is told mostly in a narrative, but it also includes some dialogue.

The novel contains one main plot. The main plot of this novel follows the progress of James Sveck in one week as he tries to convince those around him that he would rather not attend Brown University in the fall. However, James fails to convince anyone that isolating himself in the Midwest is in his best interest, including himself. In the end, James attends Brown University, bringing the plot full circle.

Quotes

"The day my sister, Gillian, decided to pronounce her name with a hard G was, coincidentally, the same day my mother returned, early and alone, from her honeymoon" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"My father has never remarried—the woman he left my mother for died, suddenly and tragically, of ovarian cancer before they could both divorce and remarry, cancer moving more expeditiously than the court system, and although he is not religious (my parents were married in the Rainbow Room by a judge) I think he felt in some way punished by this death, and since then he has been involved briefly with a long string of much younger women who all seem to have the same artificial-looking blond 'highlights' in their perfectly brown hair" (Chapter 1, p. 14).

"Of course I went with a bad attitude but it was genuinely awful right from the beginning" (Chapter 3, pg. 41).

"I felt a little like the guy who created Frankenstein, for the creature I devised did seem potentially monstrous." Chapter 4, pg. 50

"There is something inherently depressing about an empty watercooler—none of that is it half-full or half-empty, just empty - and I thought if I were a shrink and had a water cooler in my waiting room I would make sure it was always filled" (Chapter 5, p. 67).

"You get this nice (and rare) feeling that whoever built the house loved building it, and was not in a hurry" (Chapter 6, p. 74).

"My sessions with Dr. Adler often began in silence. Actually they often progressed in silence, for Dr. Adler quickly made it clear that she was primarily, if not exclusively, a reactive therapist: apparently her methodology did not condone the initial asking of questions" (Chapter 8, p. 96).

"I thought dinner theater meant that you paid one price for dinner and theater, but I didn't realize you did them simultaneously" (Chapter 9, p. 111).

"When I got home there was a man sitting on the living room couch, crying" (Chapter 12, p. 147).

"I knew my mother was wrong - John was my friend, or had been my friend. Maybe he didn't know he was my friend, and maybe I wasn't his friend, but he was my friend" (Chapter 14, p. 190).

"And it's weird because I'm antisocial, but when I connect with a stranger—even if it is only exchanging smiles, or waves, which I suppose isn't really connecting, but for me it is—I feel like we can't both go on with our lives as if nothing had happened" (Chapter 15, p. 197).

"But it seems reasonable to me. I'm only eighteen. How do I know what I will want in my life? How do I know what things I will need" (Chapter 17, p. 229).

Topics for Discussion

Who is James Sveck? What does he spend his summer doing? For what reason? Why does James find his job somewhat useless? What does James do at his job? Who is John Webster? What is James' connection to John? Are they friends? Explain.

Why does James trick John into thinking he is a man who works for Sotheby's? What does James hope to accomplish by tricking John? What does James plan to tell John when John invites him to a party? What happens when John learns the truth? How does James respond to this? Why does James not consider John's feelings when he played this trick?

Why does James' parents get divorced? What impact does this divorce have on James and his sister? How does James continue to feel about his parents' divorce? How does the impact of this divorce show itself in James' behavior? How much is the divorce to be blamed for James' admitted anti-social behavior? What about the multiple divorces of James' mother? How much are the behaviors of James' mother and father to blame for his problems?

What does Thomas Cole's Voyage of a Life depict? Why is James fascinated with these paintings as a younger teenager? Why does James throw away the copies of these paintings he has purchased? Why does James become fascinated with these paintings again while visiting Washington, D.C.? What causes James' panic attack in front of these paintings? How does James react to his own emotional breakdown?

Why does James begin to see a therapist? What does the therapist do to help James? Is the therapist helping James? Why does the therapist appear occasionally to grow angry with James? How does James manage to deflect many of the therapist's questions? Why does James resist the therapist's help? Does the therapist eventually help James?

What is September 11, 2001? What did James see on that day? How did this sight impact James? Why is James surprised when his therapist brings up September 11, 2001? Could what James saw on September 11, 2001 explain many of his emotional problems? Could it explain his reluctance to attend Brown? Explain.

Why does James begin thinking of his grandmother as having psychic abilities? Does she? How does James' grandmother save him from injury when he is a small child? Why does James suddenly remember this while visiting his grandmother in July? Why does James think his grandmother decides to tell him what is in her will? What impact does this have on James? What does James do after his grandmother dies? Why?