

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy Study Guide

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy by Sonya Sones

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Pages 3 - 15.....	3
Pages 16 - 30.....	4
Pages 31 - 45.....	6
Pages 46 - 60.....	8
Pages 61 - 75.....	10
Pages 76 - 90.....	11
Pages 91 - 105.....	13
Pages 106 - 123.....	15
Pages 124 - 145.....	17
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	22
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	30



Pages 3 - 15

Pages 3 - 15 Summary

At the opening of the collection, the narrator, a young girl called "Cookie," recalls what life was like before her sister fell ill: her entire family climbed into a giant hammock together, swaying as one. For Cookie, Sister's transition from mentally healthy to unwell happened seemingly overnight: one morning she was happy and well behaved, the next, "a wild-eyed Jewish girl wearing only a nightgown" (p. 4). Yet it wasn't just Sister who changed, when Sister "went crazy," her father and mother changed too. Looking around her, Cookie feels as if she's suddenly surrounded by strangers.

Sister's behavior swings wildly, from going on wild and unpredictable shopping sprees to zoning out, engrossed with the television. When her parents decide that it's time to commit her, Sister screams that she hates them, her voice bounding off the hospital walls. Cookie fights the urge to find an exit and help her sister run away. When Cookie's friends ask where her sister is, Cookie changes the subject. She can't cope with the truth, and it's as if all the happiness has been zapped from the family. They don't even celebrate New Year's Eve. When Cookie visits Sister in the hospital, her behavior is increasingly erratic, frightening for the young girl.

Pages 3 - 15 Analysis

Already in the opening section of the collection, or "novel in verse" as the author describes it, the reader sees how Sister's illness has fractured the family. Once unified, emotionally and spiritually, Sister's breakdown annihilates those bonds so severely that Cookie feels as if she's surrounded by strangers. She no longer recognizes Sister, understandable given her emotional state, but what is surprising is that Cookie no longer recognizes her parents: "One day he was my dad, so calm and quiet and in control, the next he was a stranger dragging my big sister away from the door, up the stairs, screaming so loud that my ears stung. One day she was my mom, so reliable and good in a crisis, the next she was a stranger standing stock still with her hands clamped over her mouth and her eyes squeezed shut, not even breathing" (p. 4-5). This fracture signifies an important shift in Cookie's identity. As a child, she identified herself firmly within her family, but once that shatters, she must struggle to re-identify outside of those strong bonds. The quest for self-identity will be at the forefront of Cookie's character development throughout the collection.



Pages 16 - 30

Pages 16 - 30 Summary

When she can't sleep at night, Cookie sneaks out of the house and swings in her backyard swing, remembering the way Sister taught her how to pump. She remembers lots of things about her sister: her delicate face and limbs, her curlicue hairdo, the way she drew faces on homemade paper dolls. Everything for Cookie is different now that Sister is institutionalized. The empty chair at the dinner table reminds Cookie of what she is missing, and if she forgets, for even a moment, the girls at her school remind her with their unnerving questions and inappropriate jokes. Cookie tries to pretend that everything is normal, but too many things upset that vision. She also desperately wants to tell her friends what she is feeling, but fears how they will judge her for her admission.

At school, Cookie has a crush on one of her boys in her class, but she worries what he will think about her if he finds out that Sister is in the mental hospital. She also fears that her friends will no longer socialize with her if they knew the truth of what had happened. Cookie also fears what will happen to her if she allows herself to think about the way she and Sister share the same genes: whatever made Sister go crazy could be festering in her blood as well. To keep her mind off things, Cookie volunteers to help in a kindergarten class set their butterfly free. The image nearly brings her to tears.

Pages 16 - 30 Analysis

Cookie's first reaction to Sister's institutionalization is overwhelming fear - fear that she will be judged, fear that her family will never repair itself, fear that Sister is lost to her forever, and fear that she might go crazy as well. Most striking among Cookie's fear includes her fear that her own mind has betrayed her. As she recounts her favorite memories of a childhood with Sister, Cookie questions whether or not the memories are real, or if she, rather than Sister, is the one who's gone crazy. These fears intensify as Cookie watches Sister slip further and further into her mental illness.

Unsurprisingly, Cookie also fears how her peers will react if they learn Sister is in a mental hospital. Rather than worrying about her fractured family or even Sister's mental health, Cookie passes each school day contemplating how she will keep the dreaded secret hidden from her friends. This conflict intensifies as Cookie feels the need to reach out to her friends for support but her self-consciousness wins and she remains silent, alone and miserable in her loneliness. As teenagers often do, many of Cookie's friends make inappropriate jokes, like the joke Kate makes on p. 26, "What path does the mental patient take to get through the forest? The psycho path!" Rather than joining in her friends' raucous laughter, Cookie shields her face to hide her embarrassment. Her life is no longer as carefree and innocent as her friends. Cookie fears that this vulnerability will make damage her, but it's more likely that this experience will make her a more compassionate, sympathetic adult.



In art class, Cookie draws a family portrait where her sister has saucers for eyes, her mother has zippers for eyes, her dad has windows for eyes, and she has no eyes at all. This represents the different ways Cookie's family has reacted to Sister's breakdown: Sister has gone crazy, mother has closed her eyes to the situation, refusing to acknowledge the truth, dad's window eyes are broken and cracked, symbolizing his loss of clear vision, while Cookie's lack of eyes symbolizes her confusion. Sister's nervous breakdown affects the entire family in unforeseen ways. Not much is known about the family's emotionality during Sister's hospitalization because the entire narrative is told from Cookie's perspective, but the reader can make assumptions based on insights like these.



Pages 31 - 45

Pages 31 - 45 Summary

Since Sister has been institutionalized, everything at home has changed. Mother has become depressed, rarely leaving her bedroom or turning off the television. Cookie looks through old photographs of the way things used to be and almost doesn't recognize her family anymore. She remembers the day she fell asleep under her bed when she was young, and the entire family thought she had gone missing. Sister called sweetly to Cookie, coaxing her out from under the bed: "When I was lost, you were the one who found me, now you're the one who's lost, and I can't find you anywhere" (p. 33-34).

Sister continues to call home regularly, often speaking nonsense into the phone. Even though it breaks Cookie's heart to hear her sister's babbling, Cookie doesn't feel like she can hang up. It's her responsibility to listen. She tries to think about what might have driven her sister insane - her father's loud crunching of carrots, the smell of her mother's cigarettes, or even the lies Cookie told her over the years. She lists all the grievances she's committed against her sister: borrowing a favorite sweater without asking, lying about forgetting to feed Sister's goldfish, reading her diary, etc. Now that Sister is gone, Cookie wishes she could take back every cruel thing she ever said about her. She continues wishing she could steal a nurse's key, unlock the doors, and set Sister free.

Pages 31 - 45 Analysis

When Cookie went missing as a child, Sister is the one who found her. On this day, she gave Cookie her nickname, the only name the reader associates with the narrator. It's interesting to note that the reader never learns Cookie's birth name, which highlights how closely Cookie associates with Sister - Sister, rather than Mother, has given Cookie her name. Once again, Cookie feels lost but there's no one around to find her: Mother lies in bed all day, Dad is distant, and Sister is missing completely. Cookie is faced with the horrible emotional realization that she is all alone, and Sister is all alone. Even though she is only twelve-years-old, Cookie feels that the responsibility to save her family is on her shoulders. She must save Sister, Mother, Dad, and herself. When she considers this great responsibility, all Cookie can do is cry and wish she had a dog to lick the salt from her cheeks. Cookie faces slipping into a depression herself, but she is strong enough to rally: her family needs her.

Everything in Cookie's life reminds her of what she is missing, even her bedroom, her private sanctuary away from the family drama. It's not very big, considering that she has to share it with Sister, but when Sister is at the hospital, it feels enormous. The room is outrageously pink: pink bedspreads, pink wallpaper, pink pillows, pink stuffed animals, curtains, rug, and flowers. The pink hue reflects symbolizes Cookie's positive outlook regarding her sister's mental illness as she looks to the future with proverbial rose tinted



glasses: "When I sit on my pink bed and look across the room, it's like looking at a rosy reflection in the mirror ... the only thing missing is another girl sitting on the other pink bed, looking back across the room at me" (p. 42).



Pages 46 - 60

Pages 46 - 60 Summary

The next time Cookie visits Sister at the hospital, her parents bicker in the front seats while the car skitters all over the ice. Cookie has no idea what she'll be walking into in Sister's room, and to top it all off, no one even acknowledges that it's her birthday. Whenever the family visits the hospital, Cookie's parents say a quick hello to Sister and then leave the girls alone. Sometimes, Cookie stays home because she has too much homework, and sometimes she simply pretends she has too much homework because she can't handle the emotional trauma. It's difficult for Cookie because her sister is different at nearly every visit. Some days she's silent and moody, sometimes she's a constant chatterbox babbling about nothing. Some days she plays cards and piano, while other days she bangs her fists on the walls and draws frightening pictures. It bothers Cookie that her mother pretends everything is normal during these visits, when it's obvious that nothing is.

On the way home from the hospital after one visit, Cookie's father starts crying so hard that he has to pull the car over the shoulder to compose himself. The family trauma of Sister's illness is so profound that Cookie vows that no matter what happens to her - if her parents are killed in a car accident, or her house burns down, or her airplane is taken over by terrorists - she will not go insane. During the phone calls home, Sister complains about the restrictions at the hospital. When she visits, Cookie can only stay for an hour. Any longer and she feels as if she's morphing into Sister: "I get this weird feeling that if I look in the mirror I'll see that my eyes have turned into her eyes, my lips have turned into her lips, and if I speak, my voice will come out sounding just like hers" (p. 58). One day when she stays a bit too long, Cookie leaves the room sobbing, begging a young nurse to unlock the doors to let her out. Moments later, Cookie realizes that the nurse isn't a nurse at all, but one of the insane patients.

Pages 46 - 60 Analysis

The fact that no one remembers or acknowledges Cookie's birthday shows just how fractured the family is. Certainly the "family in the hammock" seen on page 3 would have celebrated with their beloved daughter, but now, all eyes are on Sister and her recovery. It's no wonder that Cookie struggles with feelings of isolation, fear, and abandonment. Unfortunately, these feelings will continue until Sister begins to heal and her family can shake themselves out of their stupor. Right now, it seems as if Cookie's parents can't even deal with Sister, so they leave Cookie alone with her during the visits. This shows the reader how much pressure is truly on Cookie's shoulders. If Sister is to get well, it's Cookie's responsibility to be there for her. Again, this echoes Cookie's feeling of dread whenever Sister phones: no one else will listen to her ramblings, leaving Cookie to manage the full weight of her sister's mental illness. Often, Cookie tells her parents that she has too much homework, so they won't make her visit the



hospital. On one hand, the lie gives Cookie a feeling of control, but it also overwhelms her with guilt knowing that she is abandoning her sister.

Cookie also struggles to balance her imagination with reality. Because no one has properly explained Sister's breakdown to her, Cookie doesn't understand what has caused her to "go crazy." Now, she fears that it might be genetic, that at the drop of a hat, she too might lose control of her mind. It's interesting to note that Cookie finds Sister's drawings to be disturbing, but she doesn't see the similarities to her own art class drawings. Her perception of reality and fantasy is further challenged when she mistakes a patient for a nurse. One moment, the woman is kind and sympathetic, the next, she's "drooling, and rocking and rocking and rocking" (p. 60).

In what is arguably the climax of the novel, basic interactions, like playing a game of Monopoly, become impossible as Sister fully submits to her illness. During the game, she acts erratically, moving her piece wherever she would like (almost always straight to jail), hiding thousand-dollar bills in her blouse, or hurling the board into the air, sending plastic houses and paper bills flying. Security guards whisk Sister away, and on the way home, Dad breaks down completely, crying so hard he has to pull the car over to the shoulder. Although it's a terrible moment for Cookie, she realizes that her family has nowhere to go but up.



Pages 61 - 75

Pages 61 - 75 Summary

Cookie continues to worry whether or not she's the one going insane: "It seems like Sister is the crazy one, but what if it's really the other way around" (p. 61). When she looks at herself in the mirror, Cookie can see Sister's face staring back at her, peeking through her slitted eyes, trying to see who Cookie really is. When she sees this, Cookie can't help but feel angry with Sister. She urges her to "stop pretending" she's crazy and be normal. The pain has become so great that Cookie even dreads visiting Sister in the hospital because it hurts too deeply. Even though she hates to go, her parents force her to visit. When she sees Sister lying in bed sleeping, Cookie thinks she looks like her old self, and is reminded how much she wanted to be like Sister when she was growing up. She remembers a trip to the seaside with Sister, where boys whistled at them for their beauty and they imagined inhabiting the massive beach cottages.

Cookie's parents also send her to see a psychiatrist of her own, to talk to someone about her "mixed-up" emotions (p. 66). Cookie doesn't understand why she has to talk to a stranger; why can't she just talk to her parents? Cookie sits in the leather chair, swiveling back and forth, vowing not to say a word. Later, she lies in bed thinking about Sister, and the panic that she's turning into her tightens her chest and the only release is to scream.

Pages 61 - 75 Analysis

Despite Sister's illness, it's clear that Cookie still idolizes her. She believes that Sister can snap herself out of this because she's never known Sister to fail at anything. She begs Sister to "stop pretending," and likens her institutionalization to a game of hide-and-seek: "Come out, come out, wherever you are. You've taken this thing way too far" (p. 69). Cookie's lament to "stop pretending" is aimed specifically at Sister, but overall, the collection begs her entire family to "stop pretending." when Sister goes crazy, all the adults in her life pretend everything is fine. They stop talking - to her and to each other - because they cannot deal with the truth: Sister is sick, so Cookie begins compiling the truth in her notebook, as if for a class assignment. The notebook functions not only as a story-telling device, but also as a way for Cookie to sort through her emotions in the wake of Sister's breakdown. She is able to express all her fears, anger, and hidden emotions on the page, a perfect outlet because she would never express these feelings out loud. Through her emotional narration in the notebook, Cookie is the only family member not "pretending." In real life, however, Cookie pretends just as much as everyone else: at school, she pretends everything is fine back home. At home, she pretends everything is fine at school. At the hospital, she pretends everything Sister says is normal. Living in the lies wouldn't have such a detrimental effect on Cookie if her family could communicate, but Cookie isn't communicating with anyone, not her parents, her sisters, her friends, or Dr. Saunders.



Pages 76 - 90

Pages 76 - 90 Summary

Cookie sits in Dr. Saunders' office trying to keep her mouth shut, as usual. A group of teenage boys walk past the office singing at the top of their lungs. Dr. Saunders asks if Cookie ever sings. Startled, Cookie remembers her family singing "Dear Little Buttercup" at the top of their lungs, and she bursts out crying. Before she knows what's happening, everything she feels, thinks, and fears comes pouring out, and she sits in the office with red, puffy eyes. Mistakenly thinking that sharing the truth makes her feel better, Cookie musters up the courage to tell her friends Molly and Kate about Sister. At first, Molly and Kate are sympathetic, but as the days pass, they distance themselves from Cookie, spread gossip, and give Cookie the cold shoulder. There's lots of gossip about kids' families floating around the hallway, and Cookie fears what they're saying about her.

At school, Cookie begins to struggle with her studies, not only because of the stress of her family's trauma, but because Sister always used to help her study for tests: "the only equation I really understand is: $4 - 1 = 0$ " (p. 82). In English class, Cookie thinks about the book *A Wrinkle in Time*, and how the novel's protagonist, Meg, saves her brother's life simply by shouting that she loves him. If only this trick could work for Cookie, too. Looking around the classroom, Cookie sees her old friends giggling and passing a note. When she has the chance, Cookie snatches off a girl's desk and reads it: "Cookie's sister is cuckoo," it reads (p. 85). The note is so painful, it takes all of Cookie's strength not to burst out in tears at her desk. She crams the note in her pocket and swears to hate these girls as long as they live. Later, the teacher asks Cookie to translate a stanza from a famous French poem which, when translated, reads, "It's raining in my heart like it's raining in the city. Where is the sadness that pierces my heart?" (p. 86). Speaking those words out loud, Cookie feels as if she's standing in front of her class naked.

Pages 76 - 90 Analysis

In this section, photographs become an important symbol for captured moments in the collection. On page 76, Cookie finds a photo strip of her and Sister taken in a photo booth just a few days before Sister suffered her breakdown: "I can't see even a hint, not the slightest flicker that any of this was going to happen." As a result of this moment, this memory, Cookie develops a keen interest in photography and the beautiful emotion that it expresses. Readers with a first edition of the novel will see Sones' self portraits on the front and back cover: a woman standing in front of a mirror with a camera, her image out of focus due to shaking hands. Images like these, which Cookie references throughout the collection, symbolize Cookie's new outlook on life, where everything is shaky, muddy, and distorted. Later in the collection, she will learn the art of photography, capturing moments her own way, controlling the images preserved in her memory.



Also in this section, Cookie makes strides opening herself up to the outside world, which is met with mixed reviews. Dr. Saunders embraces Cookie's openness, leaving the young girl with a feeling of accomplishment: she bared her soul and wasn't judged for it. At school, however, surrounded by fickle teenagers rather than professional adults, Cookie is devastated when her friends turn their backs on her. It's considered "uncool" to have a crazy family member, and Cookie is only the latest casualty to high school drama, where everyone knows everything about everyone else: Audrey's mother chain smokes cigars, Michael's uncle is in prison, Jamie's dad is having an affair, Danny's brother is an alcoholic, and now Cookie's sister is cuckoo. These lost friendships further depress Cookie who already feels as if she's lost her personal identity with the fracturing of her family.



Pages 91 - 105

Pages 91 - 105 Summary

When Cookie was growing up, Sister used to come sit with her when she was afraid in the night. Now, there's no one there to comfort either of them when they're afraid. Even if Sister was afraid in her hospital room, Cookie can't help her because when she perches on the side of Sister's bed, Sister doesn't even know she's there. The whole experience is exhausting and Cookie is tired of it all: tired of having a crazy sister, tired of the hospital visits, the patients mumbling gibberish, her parents fighting loudly at night, of feeling lonely and never getting any attention, and feeling as if she's the only one keeping the family together.

In class, Cookie tells one of her teachers that she's tired of feeling depressed, so this teacher tells her to plaster on a fake smile, pretending to be happy even when she's not. Cookie tries it for a few days, sure she looks like an idiot, but she is surprised when people suddenly start smiling back at her. For the first time in a long time, a new friend, Sarah, invites Cookie to a sleepover. At the party, Cookie is surrounded by girls her own age, gossiping and laughing like the teenager she is, and she never once thinks about her sister. Cookie begins spending a lot of time with Sarah, including joining her family for a vacation at Horseneck Beach. On the drive home, Sarah's older brother Sean puts his hand up Cookie's shirt waiting to see if she'll push it away. When she doesn't, he slips his finger under her bra and her hand casually brushes against his inner thigh.

Pages 91 - 105 Analysis

Sister takes a variety of pills to help regulate her mood, leaving her feeling like Alice in Wonderland, popping pills and waiting to see what happens. She is completely overmedicated, comatose in the bed whenever Cookie comes to visit. In a way, this collection sheds light on the mental health industry during the 1970's. Little was known about mental illness, and doctors often medicated teenagers (and even children) with powerful adult medications. This seems to be what is happening to Sister. The doctors have taken complete control of Sister's treatment (for better or worse), which is likely contributing to her parents' frustration. Cookie continues to feel overwhelmed with the burden: "I'm tired of not having fun and of not getting any of the attention, and of things not being like they used to be ... and of Father never hugging me and of Mother always wanting me to rub her back ... and I'm tired of listening to her weep through my bedroom wall at night and to Father snoring right through it" (Pages 93 - 94). Emotionally, this has been a powerful coming-of-age for Cookie who admits to having stopped believing in angels and fairy godmothers. Her coming-of-age is also seen through her sexual exploration, first with Sean and later with John (in the next section). On the way home from Horesneck Beach, Sean slips his hand underneath Cookie's bra. This simple image not only informs the reader that Cookie is beginning to physically mature (she is wearing a bra), but also that she is beginning to sexually mature. She doesn't resist



Sean's advances and even brushes her hand against his thigh until her "fingertips are singed" (Page 103). These two quiet events - the hand under the bra and the loss of childhood fantasies - are two powerful moments in Cookie's transition from child to young adult.



Pages 106 - 123

Pages 106 - 123 Summary

Cookie opens the next section with the line, "My art teacher changes my life when she sees me admiring her gleaming Nikon and asks, 'How'd you like to borrow it for the weekend'" (p. 106). Cookie takes the camera to the hospital to take pictures of her sister, and gets a thrill from developing the frames in the darkroom later: "I slip the blank sheet into the chemicals and watch your face fade slowly up out of redness, smiling a deep red healthy smile at me, and I smile back, feeling like a magician" (p. 108). Recognizing their daughter's talent, Cookie's parents buy her a new camera of her own and a box full of film. Cookie is elated; it's not even her birthday!

At school, Cookie feels herself forming a crush on the new boy in her class, a boy named John with dark, kind eyes who helps Cookie pick up all her books when she drops them in the hallway. He asks for her phone number, and every atom in Cookie's body swoons as she recites the numbers. When he calls, she doesn't even remember what they're talking about because she's so focused on the sound of his peeling laughter and the way her heart threatens to leap straight out of her chest. The two spend every spare moment together, slowly taking their relationship from talking to holding hands to kissing. Everything is thrilling for Cookie, who feels as if she matters for the first time since Sister went crazy. While walking home from school with John one afternoon, Cookie can hear her parents screaming at each other a block away. Although the fighting startles John, but he still walks proudly inside the house, introduces himself, and shakes Dad's hand.

Pages 106 - 123 Analysis

The motif of photography continues in this section when Cookie is lent a professional camera for the weekend. This new tool gives both Cookie and Sister a method of control in their lives. The next time Cookie visits the hospital, Sister expresses her dislike of the photo Cookie took of her, so she snatches Cookie's new camera, snaps a self portrait, and hands it back with a beaming smile. "That," she says, smiling proudly, with her eyes still fixed on her reflection, "was a good one" (Page 115). Sister has begun to see herself as she truly is, not as what the disease has morphed her into. Through the photographs, it's clear that Sister is beginning to heal. Even her smile is described as deep, red, and healthy. The scene of Cookie in the developing room is also symbolic of her control - through the chemicals, Sister's image rises up from the darkness (another symbol for her rise from the emotional darkness of depression), giving Cookie complete control over what aspects of Sister's image she will reveal. Different chemical combinations yield different results, in the developing room as well as the hospital. The resounding message in this scene is one of healing and hope. The family, too, has begun to heal as Cookie's parents take an interest in her hobbies. They have stopped

moping long enough to notice their younger daughter's talent and to support her excitement with a new camera.

Also in this section, Cookie forms new friendships while her friendship with Sarah continues to grow. She no longer misses Molly and Kate (her old friends) and has stopped hating them. She forms a new crush, goes on a first date, and begins to fall in love. For the first time since Sister's institutionalization, Cookie begins to feel normal.



Pages 124 - 145

Pages 124 - 145 Summary

Cookie begins calling John her boyfriend, a thrilling progression in their relationship. As they spend the afternoon taking photos of each other at Rock Meadow, Cookie feels sure that she's falling in love. Because John is Cookie's first love, she shares the big news with Sister, who wants to know everything about him. She, too, has a new boyfriend on the ward, and for a moment, the sisters feel normal, giggling and laughing about their love lives. Even though she's laughing, Cookie still wonders whether or not her sister will ever have a normal life, with a normal boyfriend, again. In future visits, Sister begs Cookie to bring John and introduce them. When Cookie is hesitant, Sister accuses her of being ashamed of her. Cookie invites John, fully prepared to understand if he says no, but to Cookie's surprise, he readily agrees. At the ward, Cookie worries about what mood Sister will be in when they arrive, but Sister looks beautiful and acts charming. Cookie is so impressed she wants to kiss her. On the way home, John smiles and says that he likes Sister, which makes Cookie fall even deeper in love with him.

Although all went well for the meeting, that night, the voices in Sister's head return, and she lays silently as they whisper and cackle in her ears. She spends some time in a straight jacket and receives shock treatments, both of which startle Cooke but seem to bring peace to Sister. After the first round of shock therapy, Sister can't remember anything: her name, who Cookie is, the television shows she used to watch, the family's pet dog. For the next few meetings, Cookie desperately recounts ridiculous family memories hoping something triggers Sister's mind. For days, Sister remembers nothing until the day she remembers Mom's gold plated toilet seat. Cookie is overwhelmed with happiness: Sister is coming back to her. The next week, Sister actually recognizes Cookie when she walks through the door. With each meeting, Sister improves, and as Sister improves, so does the family. Cookie stays up late at night listening to Mom play cards with her friends, her laughter reeling through the cheerful hallways. The collection ends with an image of the family sitting together in the hospital visiting room playing Scrabble. Mom, Dad, and Sister invent their own words, spelling gibberish with their tiles, but when the moment comes, Cookie deftly spells "BETTER" to win the game.

Pages 124 - 145 Analysis

In the final section of this collection, Sones leaves the reader with a sense of hope. First, Cookie has found a new way to self-identify. When she feels as if she's at rock bottom, Cookie forces herself to find new friends, and as a result, feels happy for the first time since Sister's hospitalization. She also finds a boyfriend, John, who helps her deal with the emotional trauma of fighting parents and a sick sister. When Cookie and John start dating, Cookie begins saying things like, "I wasn't pretty until John said I was. He thinks I'm pretty even when I've been crying ... I wasn't pretty until John said I was, but now I am" (p. 119). Rather than identifying herself within her family, Cookie has



begun identifying herself within a romantic relationship. Many readers will feel an aversion to Cookie's easy acceptance of John's definition of her identity - surely a better message for young readers would be for Cookie to call herself pretty rather than for John to call her pretty - but her voice rings true. In a battered, ugly world, John gives Cookie a sense of hope and beauty. The final step in her emotional maturity will come when Cookie identifies with herself individually rather than within a relationship, but this transition is a clear step in her coming-of-age story.

From Cookie's narration, the reader learns that she feels abandoned, unimportant, even ugly. It isn't until Sister begins to recover that the family is able to reunite, even accept their lives without Sister: "I'm tucked between my mother and father, snuggling on the couch ... And tonight, for once, it feels okay to just be three" (p. 141). Even though they weren't diagnosed with depression, it's clear that Sister's sickness has infected them all, symbolically rather than physically. When her parents feel they have tried everything, they finally allow the doctors to administer shock therapy to Sister. As a result, it seems as if Sister's mind has been erased: she no longer remembers Cookie, their childhood memories, or even her own name. Slowly, with Cookie ever by her side, Sister regains her memory and identity. It appears that the shock treatments have worked, and Sister's mind begins to heal. At the end of the novel, the reader, as well as the rest of the characters, firmly believe that Sister will make a full recovery.



Characters

Cookie

Cookie is the thirteen-year-old narrator and protagonist of the collection. At the opening of the novel, Cookie is in shock after Sister's breakdown and in the wake of the family's shake-up, she feels as if she's surrounded by strangers. Everything in her life is in upheaval, including the memories of what she thought formed her family - a close knit group of four who swung together in the same hammock. Suddenly, Cookie has no idea who she is because she has lost her identity within her family. At the same time, her friends begin to distance themselves from her, erasing more important identity forming relationships. When she feels as if she's at rock bottom, Cookie forces herself to find new friends, and as a result, feels happy for the first time since Sister's hospitalization. She also finds a boyfriend, John, who helps her deal with the emotional trauma of fighting parents and a sick sister. When Cookie and John start dating, Cookie begins saying things like, "I wasn't pretty until John said I was. He thinks I'm pretty even when I've been crying ... I wasn't pretty until John said I was, but now I am" (p. 119). Rather than identifying herself within her family, Cookie has begun identifying herself within a romantic relationship. The final step in Cookie's emotional maturity will come when she identifies with herself individually, but this transition is a clear step in her coming-of-age story.

Sister

Sister is nineteen-years-old, with wild curly hair, a contagious smile, and a positive attitude. All her life, Cookie grows up dreaming that one day, she'll be as beautiful, as cool, as exciting as her older sister. All this changes when Sister goes crazy, suddenly suffering from a nervous breakdown on her way to midnight mass. Her breakdown affects the whole family, terrifying Cookie and unnerving her parents. Sister is sent to a mental hospital to recover, a move that profoundly affects her grip on reality. Suddenly, she slides into complete hysteria, emotions running amuck, throwing tantrums and babbling gibberish. When her parents feel they have tried everything, they finally allow the doctors to administer shock therapy to Sister. As a result, it seems as if Sister's mind has been erased: she no longer remembers Cookie, their childhood memories, or even her own name. Slowly, with Cookie ever by her side, Sister regains her memory and identity. It appears that the shock treatments have worked, and Sister's mind begins to heal. At the end of the novel, the reader, as well as the rest of the characters, firmly believe that Sister will make a full recovery.



Dr. Saunders appears in In Dr. Saunder's Office

Dr. Saunders is the psychiatrist Cookie's parents send her to see after Sister goes crazy. They hope speaking to a stranger will help Cookie process her emotions, but it actually scares her into thinking that she, too, is going insane.

Madam V

Madame V is Cookie's French teacher. She asks Cookie to translate an emotional stanza of a poem out loud, leaving Cookie feeling vulnerable and exposed in front of her classmates.

Molly and Kate

Molly and Kate are Cookie's best friends at school. Initially, Cookie withholds information about Sister's breakdown, fearing her new friends will judge her. When she reveals the truth, Molly and Kate are sympathetic at first, but soon start giving Cookie the cold shoulder. They pass notes around school that say "Cookie's sister is cuckoo," which breaks Cookie's heart and she swears to hate the girls as long as they live.

Sarah

Sarah is Cookie's new best friend, the first person to reach out to her after Sister goes crazy. Sarah never makes Cookie feel badly about Sister's condition and goes out of her way to include Cookie in normal social activities, which truly helps her overcome her depression.

Sean appears in Why Sister Doesn't Cross My Mind On The Way Home From Hores

Sean is Sarah's older brother and the first person Cookie has a sexual encounter with. While driving home from a vacation with Sarah's family, Sean slips his fingers into Cookie's bra, which she eagerly accepts.

John

John is Cookie's boyfriend. They meet when he transfers to Cookie's school, and the two quickly fall in love. John is hugely supportive of Cookie during her family's upheaval. He never judges her parents for their constant fighting, and welcomes the opportunity to meet Sister. He makes Cookie feel beautiful, confident, and accepted for the first time since Sister when crazy.



Mrs. Zolli appears in Mrs. Zolli

Mrs. Zolli is Cookie's art teacher who changed Cookie's life by lending her a camera for the weekend.

Dr. Milton Silver appears in Dr. Milton Silver

Dr. Milton Silver is the dentist both Cookie and Sister visited when they were growing up. Whenever Dr. Silver had Cookie alone in the room, he told her she was the most beautiful sister, but when he had Sister in the room, he told her the same thing.



Objects/Places

Midnight Mass appears in My Sister's Christmas Eve Breakdown

Midnight Mass is where Sister was going on the night that she went crazy. Rather than getting ready for church, Cookie saw her sister as, "a wild-eyed Jewish girl wearing only a nightgown" (p. 4).

The Midnight Swing appears in Midnight Swing

The Midnight Swing hangs in Cookie's backyard. When she needs to clear her thoughts, Cookie sneaks out of the house to swing, alone and silent in the wind. No matter how hard she tries to clear her mind, Cookie's thoughts always drift back to Sister.

The Butterfly appears in First Flight

The Butterfly is the kindergarten class project, which they raised from a caterpillar. A few days after Sister has her breakdown, Cookie volunteers to help the class set their butterfly free. The sight of the beautiful butterfly leaving its cage and soaring into the sky nearly brings Cookie to tears.

Cookie's Bedroom appears in English Homework: Describe Your Bedroom

Cookie's Bedroom is her private sanctuary, away from all the family drama. It's not very big, considering that she has to share it with her sister, but when Sister is at the hospital, it feels enormous. The room is outrageously pink: pink bedspreads, pink wallpaper, pink pillows, pink stuffed animals, curtains, rug, and flowers. The pink hue reflects symbolizes Cookie's positive outlook regarding her sister's mental illness as she looks to the future with proverbial rose tinted glasses: "When I sit on my pink bed and look across the room, it's like looking at a rosy reflection in the mirror...the only thing missing is another girl sitting on the other pink bed, looking back across the room at me" (p. 42).

The Mental Hospital

The Mental Hospital is where Sister is sent after suffering a mental breakdown. Her room is nothing like her bedroom at home, with a narrow steel bed, thin, scratchy mattress, and blinking fluorescent lights. There's "chicken-wire glass" on the window of



the door and "puke green" walls. Cookie wonders how Sister is supposed to get well in a room that would drive anyone insane.

Monopoly appears in Trying To Play Monopoly

Monopoly is the board game Cookie and Sister play every Sunday when she visits the mental hospital. Some days, the game play is fine, and others, Sister is belligerent, moving her piece wherever she would like (almost always straight to jail), hiding thousand-dollar bills in her blouse, or hurling the board into the air, sending plastic houses and paper bills flying.

Nantasket Beach appears in Last August At Nantasket Beach

Nantasket Beach is where Cookie and her family often go on vacation. Cookie fondly remembers a visit to the beach when boys whistled her at for the first time. She didn't know what was happening, why the boys were making so much noise, so Sister explained it to her, which Cookie thought was exactly what a big sister should do.

Boston appears in Boston

Boston is where Cookie and family travel every year for Father's "Annual Tour of Boston." Because Father used to be a taxi driver, and grew up in the neighborhood, he knows the city inside-out, so the tours are always exciting and informative.

Horseneck Beach appears in Why My Sister Doesn't Cross My Mind On The Drive Home From

Horseneck Beach is where Cookie vacations with Sarah's family. During the drive home, Sarah's older brother Sean slips his fingers up Cookie's bra, with his entire family in the car with them, and Cookie doesn't stop him. This moment symbolizes Cookie's coming-of-age as she matures from a child to a teenager.

Shock Therapy appears in Shock

Shock Therapy is what Sister receives while she is at the mental hospital. Although the author doesn't directly credit shock therapy for curing the voices in Sister's head, she doesn't start recovering until after her therapy starts.



Themes

Genetics

Throughout the collection, Cookie's main concern is not whether or not Sister will get well (although this remains a major concern for the entire family) but whether or not she and Sister are genetically wired the same way. Growing up, Cookie and Sister were inseparable. They did everything together and were so similar that Cookie says looking across the room and looking at Sister was like "looking at a rosy reflection in a mirror" (p. 42). It's no wonder that she struggles to balance her emotions after Sister's breakdown. Repeatedly, Cookie thinks thoughts like, "I get this weird feeling that if I look in the mirror I'll see that my eyes have turned into her eyes, my lips have turned into her lips, and if I speak, my voice will come out sounding just like hers" (p. 58). Deep down, she knows that she "could have been the one" whose brain suddenly turned on her, and that thought is terrifying. One of Cookie's main character developments is her quest to understand that she "deserves" to be healthy. At first, Cookie lists of her past sins, including borrowing Sister's sweater without asking, lying about reading Sister's diary, and accidentally killing Sister's goldfish, not only as apologies for adding to Sister's stress, but a list of reasons why she, rather than Sister, deserves to be institutionalized. Throughout the collection, Cookie obsesses over her similarities to Sister, even imagining Sister's face morphing into her own. It isn't until Cookie accepts the fact that she and Sister are individuals, separate yet equal, that she feels her personal identity, away from Sister's breakdown, beginning to form. She makes new friends (that have nothing to do with Sister) and even finds a boyfriend. At the end of the collection, Cookie sees herself, and Sister, as individuals. Now, she can root for Sister's recovery without fear for her own future.

Depression

Sister's nervous breakdown (due to her depression) affects the entire family in unforeseen ways. Not much is known about the character's emotionality during Sister's hospitalization because the entire narrative is told from a thirteen-year-old's perspective, but the reader can make assumptions based on their actions. As previously mentioned, Cookie wonders what she did wrong to cause Sister's breakdown, and why Sister got sick and she didn't. On one hand, Cookie feels terrible that Sister has broken down, but on the other hand, she is angry that Sister's sickness has caused upset in the family. Mom and Dad fight endlessly, with loud arguments that can be heard a street away. Cookie states that Mom lies in an unmade bed all day watching television (p. 31) while Dad sits silently brooding at the dinner table. For a while, Mom and Dad try to maintain a normal life for Cookie, taking her on vacation to Boston, for example, but it's clear that something (Sister) is missing. The family completely fractures as each member struggles with their own guilt, depression, and fears. From the constant fighting, readers surmise that Mom and Dad likely differ in opinion regarding Sister's treatment (the majority of the fighting occurs before Sister's shock therapy). From Cookie's narration,



the reader learns that she feels abandoned, unimportant, even ugly. It isn't until Sister begins to recover that the family is able to reunite, even accept their lives without Sister: "I'm tucked between my mother and father, snuggling on the couch...And tonight, for once, it feels okay to just be three" (p. 141). Even though they weren't diagnosed with depression, it's clear that Sister's sickness has infected them all, symbolically rather than physically.

Coming of Age

Whenever a book casts a young teenager as its protagonist, readers can assume coming-of-age, the transition from child to adult, will feature as a theme. In Cookie's case, her coming-of-age is seen through her sexual exploration, first with Sean and then with John. On the way home from Horesneck Beach, Sarah's older brother Sean slips his hand underneath Cookie's bra. This simple image not only informs the reader that Cookie is beginning to physically mature (she is wearing a bra), but also that she is beginning to sexually mature. She doesn't resist Sean's advances and even brushes her hand against his thigh until her "fingertips are singed" (p. 103). In her relationship with John, she advances to long, passionate kisses and the feeling that she has fallen in love. Even though Cookie is only thirteen, her relationship with John seems quite mature: they go on dates, meet each other's family, and deal with the emotional trauma of fighting parents and a sick sister. The reader is only reminded of Cookie's young age when she makes immature statements like, "I wasn't pretty until John said I was. He thinks I'm pretty even when I've been crying...I wasn't pretty until John said I was, but now I am" (p. 119). Rather than identifying herself within her family, Cookie has begun identifying herself within a romantic relationship. The final step in Cookie's emotional maturity will come when she identifies with herself individually, but this transition is a clear step in her coming-of-age story.

Style

Point of View

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy is recounted from the thirteen-year-old Cookie's point of view. She tells the story in first person, present tense narration, with the goal of setting the story straight: when Sister goes crazy, all the adults in her life pretend everything is fine. They stop talking - to her and to each other - because they cannot deal with the truth: Sister is sick, so Cookie begins compiling the truth in her notebook, as if for a class assignment. The notebook functions not only as a story-telling device, but also as a way for Cookie to sort through her emotions in the wake of Sister's breakdown. She is able to express all her fears, anger, and hidden emotions on the page, a perfect outlet because she would never express these feelings out loud. She is free to express herself openly and honestly, without holding embarrassing emotions back, which allows the reader unprecedented access to her emotional growth. Also, the point-of-view of allows Cookie to reflect on years of history, emotion, and relationships, which create a complex world for the reader to inhabit alongside her. Memories of childhood are told alongside memories from the day before, which creates beautiful layers of history and allows themes to echo throughout the years. The story is told mostly through exposition, with rare scenes of dialogue, often between Cookie and Sister at the hospital. The collection is completely filtered through Cookie's thoughts and emotions, so the reader sees the world through her unique, teenage perspective.

Setting

This collection is written specifically for a young adult audience, from the perspective of a confused, thirteen-year-old girl. Cookie writes as if in a journal, and as a result, the language is conversational and easy to follow. Because Cookie is writing for herself, not for an audience, her language is extremely basic. There is no air or pretense as she has no one to impress. As a result, there are very few new vocabulary words for readers, but they may feel an intense, intimate connection to Cookie, as if they are reading her diary. Traditionally, poetry is a harder medium for young readers to relate to, but the poems in Stop Pretending are so accessible they read almost like prose. The entire collection is written as free verse poetry, which means that it does not use consistent meter patterns, rhyme, or any other musical pattern, and as a result, sounds like regular speech. In the interview featured on her blog, Sones says that, "I'd only been writing funny poems, but then one day Myra asked us to write a poem using dactyl and trochee rhythms, which are really somber rhythms. When I sat down to do the assignment, something very unexpected happened—out popped a poem about how sad and scary it was to have to visit my older sister in the mental hospital on my thirteenth birthday. I was hesitant to share the poem with my teacher, because it was so personal. But when Myra read it, she suggested I write more poems about my sister, and that's how Stop Pretending, my



first novel in verse, was born." She has also said that poetry is the best way to get to the center of emotions, which this "novel in verse" demands.

Language and Meaning

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy is a short collection of 106 poems ranging in length from a few words to a few pages. On the outside, it appears that Stop Pretending is a straightforward poetry collection, but in the interview featured on Sones' blog, she says, "Actually, when I wrote Stop Pretending, my first novel in verse, I didn't even realize I was writing a novel. I just thought it was a themed collection of poems about my sister. It wasn't until my editor, Alix Reid, wrote me a wonderful editorial letter full of poem-provoking questions, that the collection began to morph into a novel." The main difference between a poetry collection and a novel is that a novel includes rising action, a climax, falling action, and a denouement, while poetry collections focus more on creating theme, mood, and emotion. When these two structures are compared, Stop Pretending could arguably be considered both (or even neither). There is no clear-cut climax in the novel, and therefore, it is difficult to identify rising and falling action. Some readers might consider "Trying to Play Monopoly" (p. 50) the novel's climax. At this moment, Cookie and her family realize how sick Sister truly is and that drastic measures in her treatment (shock therapy) must be taken. The rising action leads up to this realization and the falling action occurs as Sister slowly begins to heal. The denouement, or closing action, happens in the hospital visiting room. Cookie's addition to the Scrabble board, "Better," hints to the reader that all will be well, even after the novel's conclusion (p. 145).

Structure

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy is a short collection of 106 poems ranging in length from a few words to a few pages. On the outside, it appears that Stop Pretending is a straightforward poetry collection, but in the interview featured on Sones' blog, she says, "Actually, when I wrote Stop Pretending, my first novel in verse, I didn't even realize I was writing a novel. I just thought it was a themed collection of poems about my sister. It wasn't until my editor, Alix Reid, wrote me a wonderful editorial letter full of poem-provoking questions, that the collection began to morph into a novel." The main difference between a poetry collection and a novel is that a novel includes rising action, a climax, falling action, and a denouement, while poetry collections focus more on creating theme, mood, and emotion. When these two structures are compared, Stop Pretending could arguably be considered both (or even neither). There is no clear-cut climax in the novel, and therefore, it is difficult to identify rising and falling action. Some readers might consider "Trying to Play Monopoly" (p. 50) the novel's climax. At this moment, Cookie and her family realize how sick Sister truly is and that drastic measures in her treatment (shock therapy) must be taken. The rising action leads up to this realization and the falling action occurs as Sister slowly begins to heal. The denouement, or closing action, happens in the hospital visiting room. Cookie's

addition to the Scrabble board, "Better," hints to the reader that all will be well, even after the novel's conclusion (p. 145).



Quotes

"That day I sank into the wall, wondering what these three people were doing in my house and I shouted that they had to stop, even though I wasn't supposed to talk to strangers" (Page 5).

"Suddenly I'm running, stumbling, Sister's demons chasing after, leering, laughing, right behind me lurching at my heels remind me: I could have been the one" (Page 9).

"When I was lost, you were the one who found me, now you're the one who's lost, and I can't find you anywhere" (Pages 33 - 34).

"I get this weird feeling that if I look in the mirror I'll see that my eyes have turned into her eyes, my lips have turned into her lips, and if I speak, my voice will come out sounding just like hers" (Page 58).

"I blink and there you suddenly are, inhabiting your eyes again, shining your warmest big-sisterly gaze on me then slipping away before we even have a chance to -" (Page 70).

"I'm tired of not believing in God or in miracles or in angels or in fairies or in fairy godmothers" (Page 94).

"I wasn't pretty until John said I was. He thinks I'm pretty even when I've been crying ... I wasn't pretty until John said I was, but now I am" (Page 119).

"I'm tucked between my mother and father, snuggling on the couch ... And tonight, for once, it feels okay to just be three" (Page 141).



Topics for Discussion

Describe Cookie's relationship with Sister. How does it change after Sister's mental breakdown? What memories does Cookie remember about her childhood with Sister? What insight do these memories give the reader about the girls' relationship? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Where does Cookie live? What clues does she give the reader about her surroundings in the text? Why do you think Sones is so vague about the novel's setting? How does this omission relate back to the novel's themes? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Cookie's relationship with her parents. What does she feel comfortable sharing with them? What secrets does she keep from them? In your opinion, is Cookie's relationship with her parents normal for a girl her age? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Would you consider *Stop Pretending* a coming-of-age novel? What changes does Cookie undergo throughout the course of the novel? In what ways does she transition from being a teenager to being a young woman? Are these changes significant enough to constitute inclusion in the coming-of-age genre? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Aside from her parents, what important adults affect Cookie's life, particularly after Sister's breakdown? What impact do these adults make on the way Cookie's character changes throughout the family trauma? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does Sister's mental breakdown affect her entire family? Which family member is most impacted by the hospitalization? How do each of Sister's family members - Cookie, Mom, and Dad - cope with the family change? Why is this significant? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Cookie's relationship with John. Given her family situation, do you think it is appropriate for Cookie to start a romantic relationship? Why or why not? In what ways does the relationship with John benefit Cookie's life? In what way does it impede her personal growth? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.