

# Story of My Life Short Guide

## Story of My Life by Jay McInerney

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# Characters

Alison Poole is the novel's narrator and most-important character.

Twenty "going on 40,000," she feels she has seen everything and done everything, and her jaded response to most of what she sees points out the emptiness of a life lived only from one thrill to the next. Her acting is the only thing that seems to give her life focus, and praise from her teacher seems to mean more to her than anything else. Her family and friends, for the most part, are hindrances; her sister Rebecca is an exaggerated version of what Alison might become, manipulating men for financial security, while their father is too busy pursuing girls Alison's age to make sure her financial arrangements are in order. Alison truly loves only her grandparents and her youngest sister, none of whom appears in the novel.

Dean Chasen, a thirty-two-year-old stockbroker who wants to be a writer, captures Alison's eye, and they circle warily into a short-lived relationship.

Dean has just broken up with his girlfriend, and Alison later concludes that he only wanted someone to spend time with, but the desolation she feels after she betrays him with his friend Skip Pendleton suggests that their relationship had possibilities.

Didi is the ultimate party girl, attractive, sexy, and always carrying cocaine.

Alison's feelings about her are mixed; on the one hand she recognizes Didi's sex appeal and feels inferior to her in some ways; yet she knows that Didi is often overbearing and manipulative, and that her drug use has gotten out of control. While Alison helps Didi get treatment, she does not entirely approve of the results, since Didi then criticizes her drug-using friends with the same vigor she once used to get them to snort cocaine with her.

None of the members of Alison's circle are satisfied with what they have, and all of them seek more — more money, more sex, more thrills.

Only Alison's relationship with Alex, her first love, demonstrates the potential happiness that people can have together. Alison and Alex no longer have sex, but their friendship is one of the few stable areas in Alison's life, and consequently, in the novel.

## Social Concerns

Like *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), *Story of My Life* is narrated by an observant, witty, and jaded member of Manhattan's party elite. Alison Poole's descriptions of drug use and casual sex reflect a slice of life in the present, which the novel's epigraph describes as an age of anarchy.

Drug use constitutes one of the major pastimes of Alison's crowd, and although she knows rationally that it is dangerous, she generally gets swept along with the crowd, willing to temporarily lose herself and her problems in a line of cocaine. A recurring plot element is a card with the emergency number of a drug treatment center which is transferred from character to character. At the end of the novel when Alison comes to her senses, she finally uses the card to call for help.

According to the characters in *Story of My Life*, love and sex in the modern world are hardly distinguishable; the continuous use of the phrase "in lust" blurs the distinction by blending the two. Sex serves many purposes in the novel: like drugs, it helps people to forget; it can create a momentary illusion of love and security; and it can be used to hurt. But the modern dangers of casual sex are also expressed through references to AIDS, as well as Alison's accidental pregnancy. None of the characters in the novel seems capable of a long-term relationship, and new liaisons are created almost from page to page. For Alison, much of her confusion about love and sex stems from her father's incestuous advances, which she says, almost soured her on sex forever.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The first-person narration of *Story of My Life* allows interior views of the main character and captures the intelligence of a likable character living on the edge. Alison's narration is more casual than the unnamed narrator's in *Bright Lights, Big City*, with many digressions and casual interpolations, and the erratic nature of her storytelling reveals her manic energy and the lack of coherence in her life.

The narrative technique evokes works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925), but a more important link to these works is McInerney's realistic approach to fiction. Like these two earlier novels, *Story of My Life* is a novel of manners, presenting the reader with an accurate picture of a certain time and place. The reader knows what the characters drink, where they eat, what drugs they take, what Broadway shows they see.

This realism also has an artistic value: the shows Alison mentions, for example, are *Fences*, about the difficult relationship between a father and child, and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a story of sexual misadventures and deceptions similar to Alison's own story. McInerney manipulates the concrete details so that they also illuminate character, plot, and theme.

## Themes

Despite her other faults, Alison claims to believe in honesty, sometimes even taking it to an extreme. Although her behavior is not always consistent with her belief, the conflict between acting and being is a central one in the novel, expressed through the continual games of "Truth or Dare" and, paradoxically, through Alison's acting lessons. Although she is learning to act out roles, Alison's acting teacher encourages his students to draw from themselves to fill out the part. His highest praise, that someone is "inhabiting the role," comes only when he feels that the performance, and the emotions, are honest ones. Ironically, the money for Alison's acting lessons often comes through dishonesty, as when she tricks Skip into giving her money for an abortion she does not need, or when her father, who seems to be involved in some unsavory business dealings, sends money for her school.

Like McInerney's other novels, *Story of My Life* may be read as a bildungsroman, a novel that chronicles a character's coming-of-age and awareness of who he or she is. Alison faces many challenges, some sexual, some financial, all of which must be conquered if she is to become a complete person. At the end of the novel, Alison reaches some understanding about herself and who she is; even though she has not solved all her problems, her growing self-awareness and newfound acceptance of her own life must be read as a positive step.



## Key Questions

1. Does McInerney's characterization of Alison seem realistic? Why or why not?
2. Why does the phrase "in lust," recur throughout the novel? What thematic purpose does it serve?
3. What comments does McInerney seem to be making about relationships in the modern world? Why are the family members Alison loves most absent from the novel?
4. As a work of literary realism, *Story of My Life* may be read as a cultural document as well as a literary work.

What significant details do we learn about the world McInerney writes about?

5. In what ways does acting serve as a thematic device in *Story of My Life*?
6. What minor characters seem to be important in the novel? Why?
7. Many of the characters in the novel seem to be dysfunctional in some way or another. Does McInerney suggest that all people are scarred psychologically, or does he present some models of sanity?
8. In what ways can the novel be read as a coming-of-age story?
9. How does McInerney use abortion as a plot, thematic, and character-revealing device?

## Related Titles

With *Story of My Life*, McInerney continues to chronicle a frenetic world of alienation and frustration, but this work is the farthest outside himself.

Using Alison Poole as a narrator, McInerney gives the reader a feminine outlook on society that did not exist in *Bright Lights, Big City*, or *Ransom* (1985).

Although Alison is a typical McInerney character in search of meaning for her life, her outlook on men, sex, music, and fashions differs radically from the masculine viewpoint expressed in the author's earlier work.





# Copyright Information

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