

Stuck in Neutral Study Guide

Stuck in Neutral by Terry Trueman

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Plot Summary

Fourteen-year-old Shawn McDaniel is convinced his father is trying to kill him, not out of anger but from love. Shawn has cerebral palsy (CP). A blood vessel in his brain burst when he was born, leaving him without any muscle control. This means Shawn cannot walk, lift his arms on his own accord, or even smile. Unfortunately, his family believes Shawn is not only completely physically inept, but they also assume his brain is dysfunctional. That is only partially true.

In reality, Shawn's brain is fully functional. For example, Shawn is blessed with the ability to remember everything he has ever heard, from commercials to conversations. This would seem to make him a genius. However, Shawn's brain cannot put his thoughts and memories into words and, therefore, he is forced to live out the world in his own mind, without the capability to let others know he is alive inside his dysfunctional body.

Stuck in Neutral is set in the backdrop of Seattle, Washington, where Shawn lives with his mother and two siblings, Cindy who is 17, and Paul who is 16. Shawn's mother is his primary care giver; she feeds him his meals and takes care of his needs every day. His father left shortly after Shawn was born because he couldn't handle seeing his son in pain, particularly watching Shawn suffer through his seizures. Shawn has anywhere from six to twelve grand mal seizures each day. While these seizures were painful when he was younger, Shawn has adapted to them and now finds he can leave his body during the seizures and gain a sense of freedom as he floats around the greater Seattle area during these lapses. Thus, despite his father's revulsion toward the seizures, Shawn loves them.

Shawn's father, Sydney E. McDaniel, won the Pulitzer Prize for a poem he wrote about Shawn's illness and the effect it had on their family. The poem discusses Sydney's struggle to come to terms with Shawn's disability and the pain, both physical and emotional, the seizures cause for both father and son. As the novel progresses, the reader learns Shawn's father is working on a new project. Using Earl Detraux as an example, Shawn's father attempts to show the emotional side of having a son like Shawn, and the struggles families, like the McDaniel's, endure every day. This project climaxes as his father goes on an afternoon talk show, the Alice Ponds Show, to discuss Earl Detraux, a man who suffocated his disabled two-year-old son. Here, Shawn's father does not want to portray Earl as a murderer, but instead as a man who had no other choice but to end the suffering of his child, a man who gave his own life to save his son. Sydney shows the audience the complicated nature of love; Earl Detraux ended his son's life out of love.

After learning about this project, Shawn is alarmed he will suffer the same fate as Earl's Detraux's son. Shawn knows his father loves him and wants to do what he believes is best. However, Shawn wants to live, but he cannot protest. He cannot tell his father that he actually likes his seizures and that he wants to live; he cannot explain that he wants



to experience life, even if it is in a limited form. Due to his disability, Shawn is rendered incapable of speaking or conveying his true feelings.

The novel closes as Sydney sits on Shawn's bed, pillow in hand, and, through tears, professes his love for his son. Lapsing into a seizure, Shawn knows he will be unconscious when Fate runs its course, but he peacefully puts his life in his father's hands.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1. Shawn McDaniel is introduced as the novel's narrator. He begins by discussing his life as a "good news, bad news" joke. The good news, according to Shawn, is that he lives in Seattle, which he loves. He also has two older siblings, Cindy and Paul, which he looks up to. Shawn also explains to the reader that he has the special ability to remember everything he has ever heard. This began when he was three or four years old and, by the time he was five, Shawn could remember everything from music lyrics to TV commercials to conversations people had on the street. Shawn admits while this is a remarkable gift, it hasn't made him rich or famous.

This leads Shawn into his bad news. First, Shawn admits his parents divorced ten years ago because of him; his being born changed everything. The worst of the bad news is the world sees Shawn as completely disabled. According to intelligence tests, Shawn's I.Q. is 1.2, or mental age 3 to 4 months. His parents, his siblings, his teachers, and everyone he knows believe his brain doesn't work. Shawn, however, knows this is only partially true.

Chapter 2. Shawn introduces the reader to his condition: cerebral palsy (CP). This condition means Shawn's brain was damaged when a tiny blood vessel burst and took out his muscle control. Thus, Shawn cannot control any of his muscles. Shawn relates his frustration with not being able to communicate to any other character in the novel. He can't walk, talk, feed himself, or even control his eyes. Shawn admits he does know how to read, which is the result of his sister, Cindy, playing school with him when he was younger. When his eyes participate, Shawn is able to read pieces of newspapers, magazines, and books left lying open.

Shawn admits his condition has placed a strain on his family. He explains his sister and mom are loving and patient with him, but his brother gets angry sometimes. Shawn wonders what it would be like to communicate his emotions with just one person. While Shawn is frustrated, he explains to the reader there is no use spending too much time worrying about what he cannot change. He tries to live his life without spending too much time on the bad news aspects, which will just drive him to insanity. Shawn is trapped inside his body, stuck in neutral, without the ability to communicate with anyone else in the novel.

At the close of the chapter, Shawn introduces one last bad-news punch line to his life; he believes his dad is trying to kill him. Shawn relates the good news is his dad would kill him out of love, and the bad news is he would be dead.



Analysis

These first two chapters introduce the narrating character, Shawn McDaniel. The most interesting aspect of this character is he cannot communicate with any other character in the text, due to his condition. However, through his narration, he is in direct communication with the reader. While cerebral palsy leaves Shawn alone in his world, unable to connect with his mother, his father, or his siblings, Shawn's narration is a direct link to the reader. Thus, the reader experiences the world through Shawn's eyes, his thoughts, and his emotions.

Throughout the text, Shawn's tone is energetic and lively. The reader is aware Shawn loves life. He describes events vividly in the first person narration to make the reader feel as if he is truly observing through Shawn's eyes. Shawn's narration is also typical of that of a 14-year-old boy; he is obsessed with girls, swears occasionally, and often states facts in a straightforward manner.

Despite his condition, Shawn is extremely optimistic about life. Multiple times during these chapters, Shawn emphasizes the good news and tries not to dwell on the negative aspects in his life. While he does wish for the ability to communicate with others, this does not affect his entire being. Shawn is able to motivate himself and has a positive outlook on life.

The reader is introduced to a main thread in the plot line during these first two chapters. Shawn's father may want to kill him. This poses problems because Shawn admits his father would kill him out of love. At this point in the novel, the reader begins to question how a father could kill his son out of love, even if it meant ending suffering, which will become an important theme as the novel progresses.

Vocabulary

cerebral palsy, conceited, IEP (individualized educational plans), standardized, motives, conceited, divorce, intelligence, communicate, impatient, misunderstood



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3. Shawn recalls an instance last January where he encountered death. He was riding in the car with his mom and sister, Cindy. He watched as a dog ran out in the path of the car in front of them and was immediately hit by the car. Shawn recalls the dog twisted and turned under the car before being spit out by the back tire. He watches as the broken body of the dog rolls across the road. Shawn's mom pulls the car over and Cindy rushes to the dog. In the car, Shawn gazes as Cindy, crying, holds the dog's convulsing body. He sees the dog's brown eyes, which seem to be looking straight into his. In another moment, the eyes are streaked with blood and the dog dies. Shawn realizes, looking into the dog's bloody eyes, he is no longer looking at the dog, but at death itself.

Mom apologizes to Cindy for having had to witness such a horrific scene. Cindy, however, explains it was okay; it was just as she thought it would be. She explains death is similar to how Lazarus explains it in the novel, *Barabbas*; death is nothing. After this experience, Shawn reflects on the fact life always takes place in his head since he doesn't have a body. He can hear about things, but he can't actually experience them. He explains he has seen thousands of people die on television and thought he knew what death was like. This moment, however, changed everything for him. Seeing the dog die terrifies him. Watching Cindy hold the dying dog is as close to death as Shawn has ever been. He concludes when you die, your life disappears. Chapter three closes with Shawn reflecting on the fact he believes his father wants to kill him and he feels sick.

Chapter four. The episode opens with an anecdote where Shawn explains why he believes his father is trying to kill him. He tells the reader it is more of an intuition he had when his dad, Sydney, stopped by the house last week. This leads the reader into the first of many flashbacks providing insight into Shawn's life. In this episode, Shawn is sitting in his wheelchair on the back deck with his mom and dad. His mom goes inside to answer the phone and Shawn and his dad are left alone outside. Shawn relates since his dad left ten years ago, they have been alone together exactly six times, counting this memory. He also explains in fourteen years, Sydney has said Shawn's name aloud, in the presence of his son, exactly sixteen times.

While they sit alone on the deck, a crow lands on a telephone line nearby and begins to caw. Suddenly, Sydney starts screaming at the crow and asking the bird if it wants to eat Shawn's eyes. Shawn says he has never heard his dad sound this mad. Sydney grabs a glass of iced tea sitting on the table and throws it at the crow.

As the crow flies away, Sydney, still angry, begins to talk aloud. He asks what would have happened to Shawn if he hadn't been there. He contemplates Shawn's helplessness and the fact he cannot protect himself. He calls Shawn helpless and



hopeless. Speaking aloud to Shawn, his dad asks, “Maybe you’d be better off if I ended your pain?”

Shawn’s mom comes back outside and engages in a conversation with Sydney. Shawn listens and begins to reflect on the fact his dad loves him, but is concerned over Shawn’s seizures. Shawn explains to the reader he has six to twelve grand mal seizures each day, which have been present since he was born. He thinks when his dad spoke about “ending his pain” that he meant ending the seizures.

Shawn explains the seizures were more painful and difficult to live with when he was younger. He states he used to feel like “a machine breaking or an animal with my guts spilling out.”

Shawn goes on to tell the reader more about his father, Sydney E. McDaniel, Pulitzer Prize winner. He explains his dad is a contradiction. He can be angry and compassionate at the same time. Shawn states the incident with the crow is the first time he’s ever seen his dad act so angry, which is out of character for the way the world views him.

Analysis

Shawn’s encounter with death foreshadows the discussions of dying later in the novel. As Shawn watches from the car window, he comes face to face with his future. At this moment, Shawn realizes he is terrified of death and doesn’t want to face an early death at the hands of his father, however loving those intentions might be. In this scene, the dog is symbolic of Shawn’s terror and fear of dying. Essentially, the dog is symbolic of Shawn and his suffering. When Shawn gazes into the brown eyes of the dog, he is really looking at a mirror reflection of himself. Shawn recognizes death is empty; there is nothing after death, no feelings, no thoughts, nothing. Shawn, who loves life despite his disability, is concerned with losing all of the good things in his life to the hands of death.

This concern is multiplied in chapter four as Shawn witnesses his father’s rage at his handicap and helplessness. Sydney’s interaction with the crow illustrates his feelings toward Shawn’s disability; Sydney loves Shawn but believes his son is in a continual state of suffering, of which Shawn has no ability to control or help himself. Sydney also calls Shawn “hopeless.” His tone is sad at this point in the narrative and the reader can sense his desire to help ease Shawn’s pain in any necessary manner. Sydney’s comment Shawn would be “better off if I ended your pain” nags at Shawn’s consciousness and becomes a central point of conflict as Shawn continues to wrestle with the thought that his dad might be trying to kill him.

Vocabulary

collapsed, tumbled, awkward, emptiness, terrified, disappear, hopeless, helpless, condition



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5. Chapter five opens with the first of many lines from Sydney's Pulitzer Prize winning poem, "Shawn". In this section of the poem, Shawn is being conceived in his mother's womb. Shawn tells the reader he loves the beginning of the poem because he is given permission to witness his own birth and he gets to see his dad happy and excited for once. While the poem opens in a positive tone, it quickly changes in nature to describe Sydney's conflict in loving his son; love means protecting, which might mean ending Shawn's pain by any means necessary.

Shawn goes on to discuss how he feels about the word "veg." He states that the first few times he heard it, he literally believed people were turning into vegetables. In his father's eyes, if Shawn is a "vegetable" he will never be able to experience life or be productive. By this, Sydney means Shawn will never have the chance to experience life the way he should. Rhetorically, Shawn asks, "What's the point of my being here if I can't be like him?"

Shawn argues instead of allowing his father to forget his pain, the poem "Shawn," has only helped his dad relive his pain on a daily basis. To exemplify this, Shawn tells the story of the premier reading occurring two years prior. This was the first public reading of the poem, and Shawn is present. He recalls the scene felt horrible because he was celebrated for being completely misunderstood. Strangers came up to Shawn and looked at him in pity. He explains the Shawn in the poem, his father's version of Shawn, is not him at all. It is a two-dimensional version of his father's fears.

Despite all this, Shawn admits he still likes his dad's poem because it is an accurate description of how his family fell apart after his birth. He also admits he enjoys being slightly famous as a result of the poem. He loved seeing his picture on book covers and television shows after his dad won the Pulitzer Prize for the poem. Shawn's dad also gained fame as a result of the poem. This fame, Shawn claims, results in his father becoming a professional victim and whiner; Sydney left the family because Shawn's seizures troubled him. The chapter ends with Shawn telling the reader he actually loves his seizures. For Shawn, the seizures open doorways to places that are real and far better than reality.

Chapter 6. The chapter begins with a second installation of Sydney McDaniel's Pulitzer Prize winning poem, "Shawn." This part of the poem portrays the moments after Shawn's birth. As his father holds the newborn in his arms he sees a small quivering in his eyes and depicts all the plans they made and would ever make as slowly unraveling.

Shawn begins this chapter by discussing his love for his seizures. He tells the reader he never knows when a seizure will happen, but describes it as a miracle when it does occur. He takes medicine to control the convulsing of his body, which protects his body



and bones from breaking when the seizures happen. Thus, it is mainly his mind that is affected when the seizures take hold. Shawn explains, due to an automatic, uncontrollable reflex, the seizures cause him to smile and laugh. While this irritates his family, Shawn admits the laughter feels great. However, Shawn reflects it is hard to enjoy himself when his family is distressed about the affect the seizures have on his body and mind.

Shawn goes on to narrate about how his spirit leaves his body when the seizures take hold, which is why he loves them so much. This first occurred when he was ten years old and it scared him at the time. Shawn thought he had died and was afraid to wander too far away from his body. Over time, however, he begins taking longer journeys away from himself. These trips give Shawn a sense of independence, an emotion he is not allowed to feel on a regular basis. For this reason, his seizures became very important to him as he enjoys the feeling of controlled movement and escaping his prison-like body. During these times, Shawn experiences freedom as he gains complete control over his motions and is able to do all the things he observes other people doing such as walking, skipping, sitting, swimming, and even flying. He ends by explaining whether real or not, seizure trips are a part of his life he loves.

Analysis

The second installation of Sydney's poem in chapter six becomes an important viewpoint for the reader to understand how the McDaniel's lives have changed after Shawn's birth. The poem recites all their dreams began "unraveling," meaning their family would be torn apart and their lives changed forever.

Shawn's discussion of his seizure trips illustrates his need for freedom and control. These are the only times Shawn is allowed to have control over his body and, therefore, it is no surprise that he loves these moments. Shawn admits he doesn't even know if the trips are actually real, but the implications of tasting freedom are real to him. This is the second instance in which the reader is given a perspective into Shawn's helplessness. (The first time being his encounter with the crow on the deck in chapter 4). This theme of helplessness begins to grow as Shawn becomes more sure of his father's desire to kill him.

Vocabulary

fetus, braying, tidal, seizure, Pulitzer Prize, premier, fortnight, quivering, unraveling, impulses, frontal lobe, homely



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7. The third portion of the poem begins with a description of Shawn's body. His arms and legs are compared to "overcooked spaghetti laced with the bones of dead birds." His eyes are described as being blank.

Shawn opens this chapter with a discussion of his school. He attends the Severely/Profoundly Handicapped Special Education Program and Shoreline High School in Seattle, Washington. There are only seven students in the classroom, including Shawn. His teacher's name is Mrs. Hare and there are two teacher's assistances, Becky and William, whom Shawn describes as being extremely nice and patient. Shawn fantasizes about Becky, but quickly recalls he will never have a chance with her since he cannot communicate. Shawn goes on to describe the other pupils in his class. He says his classroom is a lot like a zoo; the students moan, drool, and defecate in their pants. To be admitted into this classroom, students have to demonstrate lack of continence, meaning they cannot use the bathroom on their own. Thus, the teacher and her aids are always busy. Shawn explains he is probably the only super genius in the room, which is slightly ironic because, by physical appearances, he would seem to be the most disabled. Most of the students in the room have at least some physical control, some can speak, some can walk. Shawn cannot do any of this. However, he enjoys school and the interaction of being with other people.

Yesterday, Shawn's dad, Sydney, came to his classroom with the Channel 7 news station crew. Sydney begins filming by introducing himself and Shawn, who he describes as "profoundly developmentally disabled." Sydney goes on to discuss the price of special education, which costs tax payers about 35,000 dollars each year. He says he is at Shawn's school to discuss the ramifications of educating the uneducable and argues hundreds of thousands of dollars each year are being spent on teaching students who cannot learn. He asks his audience to think about what should be done with students, like Shawn, who cannot be educated.

As Sydney continues to speak, Shawn lapses into a seizure. Shawn only catches phrases of what his father says next. Shawn hears his father argue if there is no hope, someone should end the child's pain. While Sydney continues to speak to the camera, Shawn's spirit floats through the classroom and outside to the basketball courts. When he finally re-enters his body, he realizes he has missed most of what his father had said. Then, Shawn remembers the phrase, "end his pain" and grows anxious while wondering how much longer he has to live.

Chapter 8. The fourth installment of the "Shawn" poem includes his father asking why this had to happen to his family. There is no reply.



Shawn tells the reader his father left when he was almost four. He remembers the last time his dad fed him, which happened to be the same week he left. In the memory, Sydney spoons sloppy vegetables into Shawn's mouth, Shawn coughs, and spits them all over his dad's face. In a fit of rage, Sydney throws the spoon across the room and exclaims while he is not mad at Shawn, he is mad at the disability.

Shawn also recalls a later instance when he overhears his mother talking to a friend about his father leaving. Lindy, Shawn's mom, states the piece that bothers Sydney the most is not knowing if Shawn is aware or not. She explains the doctors have said it would be nearly impossible for Shawn to have any awareness, but there is still a chance. It is that chance of awareness that drove Shawn's father away. His mother explains to her friend his dad left because he couldn't stand to see Shawn suffer through his seizures, knowing his mind might be trapped inside his body.

Shawn closes this chapter by telling the reader that both he and his father have double-jointed thumbs that can bend at almost any angle to look broken. Sometimes Shawn's dad will bend both of their thumbs back, which makes him feel much loved by his father. This causes Shawn to say he almost trusts his dad to know what is best and what is the right thing to do.

Analysis

The "Shawn" poem begins to take on more meaning in these chapters. We see Sydney's view of Shawn as broken and dead. He believes Shawn to be completely empty inside. In the poem, Sydney struggles to understand why this suffering has happened to his son and to his family. This attempt to understand is visible in the poem, but also in Sydney's actions. When he goes to Shawn's school and completes his interview for the camera, Sydney is attempting to ask some of the more difficult questions that have been plaguing his mind since Shawn's birth, such as "What do we do?"

The reader is given another glimpse into this struggle in chapter eight as Shawn recollects his father's frustration and ultimate abandonment. The key moment in this chapter is the discussion of Shawn being trapped inside himself. The reader knows this is, indeed, the case. Shawn's mother dismisses the idea, which is completely driving his father insane. Ironically, however, being trapped inside his own body does not stop Shawn from being happy. Instead, the reader knows Shawn is enjoying his life, especially his seizures. Likewise, in the text, Shawn alone knows this, which is why he is conflicted by the idea his father might want to end his life and his "pain."

The double jointed thumb connection between Shawn and his father also becomes important in this scene as the reader sees a connection between the father and son. As shown in earlier passages, Sydney laments the fact that his son will never be able to do the things he can. The double jointed thumb is symbolic of the physical connection between these two. While Shawn may not ever be able to physically do the same things his father does, he shares this in common, thus connecting them. However, this



connection could prove fatal if Shawn's father does decide to kill his son out of love for him, which is exactly what Shawn fears most.

Vocabulary

severely, profoundly, contraption, expulsion, emulsions, continence, uneducable, intolerable, enforcer, prefer, intention



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9. The fifth installment of the “Shawn” poem describes a void where Sydney’s heart should be. Instead of a heart, Sydney finds a ghost bird that is flying into a windstorm in the middle of winter. Instead of flying, the bird seems to be falling.

The chapter opens with Shawn’s optimism about his older sister’s sleepovers. He points out being disabled does have its advantages, especially when you seem invisible. He relates he cannot have an intimate relationship with a girl, but he does enjoy watching his sister’s friends prance about in their underwear in front of him.

Shawn is excited because his sister, Cindy, has a new friend over tonight. Her name is Ally and Shawn thinks she is the most beautiful creature he has ever seen. He says his stomach aches and he feels warm when she talks to him. He says he feels dizzy and better than he has ever felt before.

That night, as Shawn lies in his crib-like bed, he looks up at the cardboard African animal mobile hanging above him. There is a giraffe, tiger, lion, parrot, zebra, and a hippopotamus. He has looked at this mobile for so many years, he can describe exactly how many spots and teeth are on each animal. Shawn describes this as an “immobile” mobile.

In his dream that night, he is alone with Ally and they kiss as they sit on the top of the Space Needle, dangling 600 feet above the city. Shawn tells Ally he loves her and she returns his gesture of affection. In his dream, Shawn feels so loved he begins to cry. Shawn awakes to a fly that has landed on his face. Since he has no muscle control, he cannot make the fly go away. Shawn watches the fly and wonders if it is feeding on his face or laying eggs on him. He reflects on his dream and how wonderful he felt. He posits that, before the dream, his fears of death were based on not knowing what is coming next and it did not matter if dying stopped everything. However, after the dream, Shawn decides he does not want to die; thinking about how good the dream felt, he wonders how many other great feelings he might experience someday. He decides he wants to feel love. Not the kind of love that one feels for their family, out of devotion, but the kind of love where someone actually knows you. He wonders what would happen if there was a way to let someone know who he really is. Shawn thinks if his dad were to kill him now, no one would ever know who he truly is and, therefore, he would never be loved in that way. He wonders if someone could love him enough to really discover him trapped inside his body and decides this might be the key to his salvation.

Chapter 10. In the sixth section of the poem, Sydney reflects that his world is falling apart as he fails to communicate with his wife, Lindy. He can no longer even look at himself, due to the guilt he is feeling.



Shawn's mom feeds him his breakfast and calls his other siblings to the table. Lindy, Shawn's mom, explains that Shawn's father, Sydney, has decided to go on an afternoon talk show, the Alice Ponds Show, to discuss his new project. She reveals that his project is the composition of a new book that details Earl Detraux, a man from Eastern Washington who is currently serving a 20-year sentence in prison for suffocating his two-year-old brain damaged son. Both Cindy and Paul, Shawn's siblings, are confused as to why their father is writing a book about Detraux. Their mother explains while she doesn't agree with their father, she believes he is trying to help the general public understand what it is like to live in a family with someone like Shawn. Their father has extended an invitation for Cindy and Paul to join him on the afternoon talk show, the Alice Ponds Show. Paul immediately turns down the offer and calls his father a "hopeless jerk." Cindy is more receptive to the idea and wonders if her father really does care about other families with children like Shawn. Their mother reassures her he is simply trying to do what he thinks is right.

Shawn, sitting nearby, hears everything. He finds himself agreeing with his brother and his mother. He sees his father as being selfish, but also recognizes he wants to help other people. Shawn recollects Earl Detraux is not an educated man, like his father. When charged with the murder, Detraux did not deny it. He said he committed the crime to end his son's pain. After this epiphany, Shawn grows more concerned for his own life.

Analysis

Shawn's encounter with Ally and the emotions that follow are essential for his realization he does not want to die. There is still too much left for him to experience; too much life left for him to live. Shawn realizes how beautiful emotions can be and that they are worth living for and experiencing, even if he can only experience them in a limited form.

This ties into Shawn's discussion of his "immobile" mobile. Like the African animals hanging over his bed, Shawn is also stuck. He does not have control over his life. This is magnified when Shawn awakens from his dream to find the fly on his face, which he can do nothing about. He is completely helpless and immobile, like the animals suspended above him.

The discussion of Earl Detraux illustrates Shawn's fears of dying. Shawn fears his father, like Detraux, will try to end his pain by killing him. The reactions of Cindy and Paul to their father's decision illustrate very different perspectives of Sydney McDaniel. On one hand, he can be seen as trying to help others understand how difficult life can be. On the other, his move can be seen as selfish and unfeeling. These emotions also come forward in the poem. While Sydney clearly loves Shawn, he still experiences a void. He cannot love Shawn in a way Sydney believes his son deserves to be loved, which causes the father a great deal of pain. Here again, Sydney's emotions can be viewed as a dichotomy. He loves his son, but cannot understand him. He cannot love Shawn in a way that Shawn deserves to be loved; the way Shawn envisions love when he thinks of Ally.

Vocabulary

advantages, intimate, Maxfield Parrish, stimulation, immobile, resentful, meringue, controversial, terrible, flying, falling, mobile



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11. The poem at the beginning of this chapter explains the emptiness Sydney feels at the “loss” of his son and how the entire family structure suffers as a result. He explains, in the poem, that although he and his wife look at each other, there is nothing left for either of them to see.

Shawn’s narration explains his dad and sister flew to Los Angeles earlier that week to tape the Alice Ponds Show, which is the talk show discussed in the previous chapter. Today, Shawn, his mom, and his siblings are waiting for the show to air. The narrative then switches over to the show where Alice Ponds, the hostess, introduces Shawn’s father onto the show. She explains he will be discussing his newest work, a book about Earl Detraux. As Shawn’s father and his sister enter the stage, Shawn feels a seizure coming on.

After the seizure passes, Shawn acknowledges that Alice Ponds has just asked his father a question, about which the reader is not informed. Sydney responds he loves his son and he knows Earl Detraux loved his son as well. At this statement, both Alice Ponds and the live studio audience are stunned. Sydney goes on to question how each individual there and watching at home would react if they had to watch their child suffer the worst horrors imaginable. He argues the definition of love includes taking responsibility for someone who lacks the necessary skills to help themselves. He argues Earl Detraux did what he believed was right to save his son from incomprehensible suffering. He contends Earl loved his son enough to sacrifice his own life to end the pain.

The show then cuts to a pre-recorded video of Earl Detraux at the state penitentiary. In the video, Sydney sits across from Earl and asks him to talk about his son. Earl explains to Sydney while most people will never understand, he killed his son to end the child’s suffering. He explains he felt that his son was in the hands of demons, who only wanted to torture him. At this point, Earl Detraux begins crying on tape. He goes on to state he didn’t care about what anyone else thought about his actions; it was something that had to be done because he loved his son. Sydney asks Earl if he would do it again if he could go back in time. Earl answers he would do it again if it got him out of watching his child suffer.

The chapter ends as Shawn contemplates the relationship between Earl and his father. He reflects Earl was putting his son ahead of himself, showing the true nature of love. Earl believed loving his child meant ending his suffering by any means necessary. Shawn thinks about this and decides his father’s decision to study Earl Detraux shows his dad is still thinking about what action to take. He contemplates that his dad loves him, just like Earl loved his son, and that Sydney is currently searching for any reason not to kill Shawn. At this point, another seizure takes hold to end the chapter.



Chapter 12. This stanza of the poem describes Shawn as dead, despite the fact that he is a living being who eats and drinks. His father describes him as being trapped inside himself, a being that no one will ever understand.

The narrative opens while Shawn is still lost in his last seizure, which ended chapter 11. He can hear his sister talking on the Alice Ponds Show, but he cannot keep his spirit inside his body to hear what she says. Shawn soars out of the house and into the sky. He thinks about how much he wants to live.

When the seizure ends, Shawn overhears his brother and sister discussing their father and his relationship with Earl Detraux. To Shawn, it sounds as if they are also thinking their father might be planning to kill Shawn. They, however, doubt he will go through with this plan. Shawn is surprised to hear them discussing the same topic he has been thinking about. Their conversation ends with Paul stating even if their father wanted to do something, he would have to come through Paul. Shawn acknowledges exactly what this means.

At this point, the narrative jumps to a flashback occurring last summer. Paul and Shawn are outside in the front yard of their house. Shawn sits on the porch in his wheelchair and Paul is weeding the rock garden. Paul was working on the side of the house, when two teenage boys walk up the sidewalk toward the bus stop. One of boys calls toward Shawn and asks about the bus. They boys laugh and joke about Shawn's disability. They continue to ask Shawn about the bus, but Shawn cannot answer them. The boys come through the gate and begin to laugh angrily at Shawn. Shawn feels a hot sensation and realizes one of the boys is holding a lighter under his chin. Helpless, Shawn can do nothing to stop this.

At that moment, Shawn witnesses Paul as he pounces on both of the strangers. Shawn tries to focus his eyes, but mostly hears the sounds of fists and whimpering. Finally, he sees the bigger of the two boys lying face down in a puddle of blood and the other boy, terrified, bloodier than his friend. Shawn describes his brother, Paul, as a "machine" still hitting the standing stranger and kicking the unconscious one. Shawn explains he could hardly recognize his brother, who looked more like a monster than a human. Paul then runs out of view and re-emerges with a gas can. He pours gasoline on top of the two strangers, now both lying on the ground. Paul takes the lighter from one of the teenagers and flicks it. The lighter, however, doesn't spark because the safety is on. Paul flicks the safety off and is about to set both the boys on fire when Cindy emerges from the house, screams his name, and tackles him. At this point, Paul backs off and the strangers timidly scurry away. Shawn admits he never loved or feared his brother more than in that moment. He also realizes that his brother cannot protect him forever.

Analysis

Chapter 11 gives both Shawn and the reader a closer examination of Sydney McDaniel's project with Earl Detraux. As Sydney attempts to make Earl appear more human, the reader becomes more concerned for Shawn's safety. It appears Sydney is



sympathizing with Earl in an attempt to show love means putting your child's life over your own and doing whatever is necessary to end that child's suffering. This episode convinces both Shawn and the reader Sydney is becoming more involved in a plot to murder his own son.

Paul's episode in chapter 12 again illustrates Shawn's helplessness. Defenseless against the bullies, Shawn can do nothing to save himself. It is only through the strength of his brother, that Shawn is saved from the lighter. This instance exemplifies Sydney's fear with the crow in a chapter 4. In this chapter, the similarities between Paul and Sydney McDaniel are also magnified. While Sydney argues that a father would do anything to end his son's suffering, Paul illustrates the same idea. He was willing to kill the two strangers to protect Shawn. Thus, both of these men, Paul and Sydney, illustrate the necessity of death in protecting those who are loved.

The poems in these chapters further the gap that threatens the McDaniel family. Shawn's existence created a void that no one understands, not even those living in the McDaniel household. In the chapter 12 poetic stanza, Sydney worries Shawn may be trapped inside himself, in a place no one will ever be able to understand. As seen in previous chapters, this is one of Sydney McDaniel's largest fears.

Vocabulary

Controversial, excruciating, responsibility uneducated, inappropriate, smothered, audience, applaud, disorder, profound, invisible, procedure, defecate, cumulus, references, sensation



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13. The chapter opens with a stanza of the poem describing Shawn and his father alone in the darkness. In the poem, both characters are disappearing.

Shawn tells the reader it has been five days since the airing of the Alice Ponds Show and he cannot stop thinking about whether or not his father is going to kill him. He goes on to explain his brother, Paul, is 300 miles away at a basketball tournament in Spokane, Washington and his mother and sister will meet him there over the weekend.

Shawn continues to explain how he feels about death. He recalls he typically reflects on the good things in his life, but his anxiety is making that nearly impossible. Shawn takes the reader into a memory of Christmas when he was six years old. He recalls hearing his siblings, early that Christmas morning, ripping their presents open and taping them shut again, peeking at what was inside.

In another memory, Shawn is eight and with his entire family at the Pacific Science Center. His dad takes him on a virtual reality simulator. Because the wheelchair cannot go into the ride, his father holds him while they reel through the simulation. Shawn states various other memories he has of laughter and smiles and faces. He tells the reader, memory is all we have. He wonders if, after he is dead, someone will pick up his dad's poem and think they remember him, think that they know him when really they have no idea. Shawn wonders if there will be a special note attached to the poem explaining his father killed him, in an act of "love." Shawn becomes frustrated thinking about how, if his father kills him, no one will ever have the chance to truly know him. Shawn is not ready to give up hope he may someday be known and loved.

Chapter 14. This stanza of the poem describes Shawn sleeping. It likens his spirit to a feather on a quiet river. The chapter opens with Shawn dreaming. In his dream, he visits his dad's house. His dad is sleeping and Shawn, still dreaming, whispers to him. Shawn introduces himself to his dad, who claims not to know him. After a moment, his dad recognizes him and proclaims Shawn is gone. Shawn tries to tell his dad he is present, but his dad insists Shawn is not present and is an angel. At the end of the dream, Shawn tells his dad he loves him and adds he doesn't want to die.

Analysis

The poem in these chapters foreshadows Shawn's death. The stanza in chapter 14 illustrates this concept with words such as sleep, quiet, still, silence, slumbering, spirit, and quiet. The poem illustrates how little Sydney McDaniel understands his son.

The information at the beginning of chapter 13, which discusses Paul's basketball tournament, foreshadows the upcoming events in chapter 16, where Shawn is left alone



with his father. Shawn's memories in this chapter give the reader a glimpse into his younger life and the connections between him and his family. This is particularly applicable in the memory of Shawn's father taking him into the virtual simulator at the Pacific Science Center. Here, the reader witnesses one of the only moments that Sydney attempts to connect to his son and how much Shawn values and needs his father's connection. It is also important to note that, through the virtual simulation, Shawn is able to gain the ability to move about and gain a sense of freedom, something he could never have in actual reality. Finally, at the end of the chapter, the reader is given another window into Shawn's thoughts and his desire to live. Unfortunately, Shawn cannot voice this desire and other events in the narrative seem to hint that his death appears to be approaching.

Shawn's dream is also extremely telling and leads the reader to draw conclusions about Shawn's untimely death. In the dream, Sydney refuses to acknowledge Shawn's existence and the fact his son might be alive inside his body. His father apologizes for saying good-bye and tells Shawn he became an angel. Saying good-bye could imply leaving the family, but also implies saying good-bye in death. The fact that Sydney calls Shawn an angel at various points seems to point the reader to believe that his father has said good bye to his son in death. Shawn desperately attempts to tell his father how much he wants to live, although this is all in vain. His father refuses to listen.

Vocabulary

Tournament, rely, virtual reality, simulation, desperate, machine, reaction, slumber



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15. The poem that begins this section describes two birds that are falling instead of flying. The birds pass through a blind, silent prayer and whisper good-bye to their dreams. While they fall, the birds whisper good-bye to one another.

When the chapter opens, it is Saturday morning. Shawn is surrounded by supplies that are being packed for the family's overnight trip to Spokane to see Paul play in the basketball tournament. Shawn will stay in Seattle with Vonda, his respite care provider. After his family leaves, Shawn has a seizure and his spirit travels around Seattle.

When Shawn wakes from his seizure, he hears a car pull up and is startled to see that his father has come to visit. Vonda, who has never met Sydney McDaniel, asks for his autograph. He appeases her and then tells Vonda she can leave and he will spend the night alone with Shawn. Shawn is frightened as he recalls his dad has never stayed with him alone overnight. He worries that tonight will be the time his father decides to kill him.

Chapter 16. This installation of the poem describes Lindy, Sydney and Shawn sitting in silent darkness. He describes Shawn's breath as saying good-bye, as his grandfather's breathing, as love, and finally as his own breath as they breath as one.

Shawn contemplates, as he hears his dad enter the room, that whatever happens will be for the best. He wonders if death will be like the day he saw the dog dying or if it will be more like flying free forever. His father sits at the end of Shawn's bed, close to where the pillow lies. As Shawn lies in bed, his father tells him how much he loves him. Sydney takes Shawn's thumb and bends it backward to show that their double jointed thumbs make them one in the same person. Shawn reflects his father has rehearsed some of what he is saying and doing. Sydney continues to tell Shawn how much he loves him and then breaks down into tears. He goes on to tell Shawn he cannot think of his son suffering and in pain. He wonders aloud if Shawn can hear him and if he understands everything. He tells Shawn he dreamed about him and Shawn spoke, but he couldn't remember what Shawn said. Finally, Sydney states that he doesn't know what to do and Shawn notices the pillow is now in his father's lap.

Shawn's eyes, which have been shifting around the room, fall directly on his father and their eyes lock. Shawn realizes that, at this moment, they have connected together again and become one in the same, just like in his dream. His dad tells Shawn one more time that he loves him and then Shawn feels a seizure coming on. Shawn realizes that he will not be aware of what happens next, but either way he will experience a sense of freedom.



Analysis

Sydney's poem in these chapters indefinitely connects the father and son together. In chapter 15, they are described as falling birds - birds that cannot fly - and are whispering good-bye to one another. The notion that these birds cannot fly, something that is essential to their existence, is key to understanding the relationship between Shawn and his father; Shawn cannot fly, nor experience freedom, because of his disability and Sydney cannot experience this freedom because of the guilt he feels for his son. In the poetic segment in chapter 16, Sydney says goodbye to both himself and his son. Symbolically, this could mean he is saying good-bye to Shawn before he kills him and, at the same time, saying good-bye to his own life, which will be taken after committing this act. Sydney recognizes he and Shawn are completely connected.

The end of the novel is ambiguous. There are many hints in chapters 15 and 16, as well as throughout the novel, that Sydney intends to suffocate Shawn with the pillow. This ranges from his tone of voice when speaking to Vonny, the respite care provider, to his interview with Earl Detraux, and even Shawn's own intuition. Sydney's confession, as he sits on the edge of Shawn's bed, indicates he has rehearsed and contemplated this moment. There is little doubt that Sydney does suffocate his son. However, neither the reader nor Shawn will ever be sure as both slip into Shawn's seizure with Sydney sitting on the edge of the bed, pillow in hand.

Vocabulary

Respite care, soaring, spirit, rummaging, volunteer, rehearse, composure, frail, creases, armistice, unconscious



Characters

Shawn McDaniel

Shawn McDaniel is a fourteen-year-old boy who has cerebral palsy, or CP. This means that a tiny blood vessel in Shawn's brain erupted when he was born and eliminated his muscle control. Because of this, Shawn cannot walk, speak, feed himself, or even use the restroom on his own. He completely relies on those around him for care.

This does not bother Shawn much, however. Instead, he stays optimistic about life, enjoying the things he sees, places he goes with his family, and the emotions he feels as a result of life. For Shawn, life was completely bearable until he becomes attuned to the idea that his father might be trying to kill him. Shawn narrates these events to the reader through his thoughts. He details events that might imply that his father is indeed thinking about killing his own son. Shawn is conflicted about how to feel about this; on one hand he thinks his father knows best and understands that if his father does try to kill him, it will be out of love. On the other hand, Shawn enjoys life and wants to experience all the emotions associated with living.

Shawn recognizes, if his father is trying to kill him, it is not out of anger or spite, but instead out of love. Throughout the narrative, Shawn gathers evidence that this may, indeed, be the case and becomes anxious as he decides he wants to be able to live and experience emotions. He attempts to weigh out the pros and cons of his father's choice, over which he has completely no control.

Sydney McDaniel

Sydney McDaniel is Shawn's father. Sydney won the Pulitzer Prize for his poem, "Shawn," which details Shawn's birth and the subsequent disintegration of the McDaniel family. The poem is written in 12 stanzas, which are never shown altogether, but instead begin each chapter, beginning with chapter 5. Sydney and his wife, Lindy, were divorced when Shawn was 4 because Sydney could not stand to watch Shawn undergo his seizures, which Sydney believes cause Shawn suffering and pain.

Shawn believes his father may be trying to kill him. This is pieced together through inferences Shawn makes throughout the text. One concrete piece of evidence occurs when Sydney goes on an afternoon talk show, the Alice Ponds Show, to discuss his upcoming book, which details the life of Earl Detraux, a young father who suffocated his two year old son to relieve his suffering. Throughout the text, the reader sees Sydney as a man who loves his son dearly, but is conflicted and does not know how to deal with Shawn's disability. While Sydney attempts to understand Shawn, he fails to really know his son.



Linda (Lindy) McDaniel

Lindy McDaniel is Shawn's mother and primary care taker. Shawn tells the reader his mother had to give up her career in order to take care of him full time because he is incapable of caring for himself. Lindy is patient and loving. She cares very deeply for all of her three children. Lindy and Shawn's father are divorced and she admits on several occasions she does not understand or agree with everything Sydney McDaniel does; however, she reiterates he attempts to do what he believes is right.

Cynthia (Cindy) McDaniel

Cindy is Shawn's older sister, who is 16 years old. She, like her mother, is patient with Shawn. Shawn enjoys when Cindy has sleepovers and her friends undress in front of him, completely forgetting that he is even there. Cindy is loving and rational as she attempts to always take everyone's perspective into consideration.

Paul McDaniel

Paul is Shawn's older brother, who is 17 years old. Like his father, Sydney, Paul is impulsive and quick tempered. However, Paul does not get along with his father at all and is not on speaking terms with him throughout the text. Paul acts as Shawn's protector. This is particularly notable in the chapter where the teenage strangers attempt to burn Shawn with a lighter. Paul intervenes and would have killed both strangers if Cindy had not intervened. Paul notes even if their father is thinking about killing Shawn, he would have to come through Paul first.



Objects/Places

The Seattle Center

This is one of Shawn's favorite places to visit, both in reality and when his spirit leaves his body during his seizures. He enjoys going to the Space Needle and the Pacific Science Center, both located at the Seattle Center.

Wheelchair

This is the only way Shawn can move around without being carried; he cannot walk.

Eyes

Eyes are mentioned several times in the book. First, because Shawn cannot control his own sight and must focus on whatever his eyes land on. Later, they are brought up again in the episode with the crow in chapter 4 and the myth that crows like to eat out children's eyes. Finally, at the end, before Shawn's father makes his final move, the two make direct eye contact.

Crib

Shawn's bed is a crib, with a removable bar so that he may be placed in and taken out of the crib.

Fire

The strangers threaten to burn Shawn with fire. When Paul attacks he nearly drowns them in gasoline and almost kills them by lighting them on fire.

Birds

There are three notable accounts with birds in the story. The first is the episode with Shawn's father and the crow. The second occurs in a memory, as Shawn conspires with a robin to tell on his brother and sister for peeking at their Christmas presents. Finally, the poem "Shawn" mentions falling birds.

Filming

There are three instances of cameras in the text. The first occurs when Shawn's father comes to his school with the channel 7 news to film a special about tax dollars paying to



educate the uneducable. The second instance occurs when Sydney and Cindy McDaniel appear on the Alice Ponds Show to discuss Shawn's disability and Earl Detraux. The third is an interview aired on the Alice Ponds Show where Sydney McDaniel interviews Earl Detraux.

Pillows

This is the weapon Earl Detraux used to suffocate his son. At the end of the novel, Sydney McDaniel sits at the edge of Shawn's bed, crying and holding a pillow.

Seattle, Washington

Seattle is where the McDaniel's live. Shawn loves the city greatly.

Spokane, Washington

A place in Eastern Washington where Shawn's mother and sister go to watch his brother play basketball. This sets the narrative up for Shawn to be left alone, overnight, with his father.



Themes

Flying

Flying offers a sense of freedom and mobility, something Shawn will never, in reality, be able to grasp. Shawn is able to fly and experience this emotion each time he has a seizure and his spirit leaves his body. In places, death is also referred to as being related to flying and being set free.

Suffering

This is a key theme throughout the book as it provides motivation for Earl Detraux to end his son's life. Like Detraux, Sydney McDaniel also leaves his family because he cannot watch Shawn suffer through his seizures. Sydney worries that Shawn undergoes horrendous suffering with each seizure, which occur 6 – 12 times each day, although Sydney has no actual proof the seizures actually cause Shawn pain. In reality, Shawn tells the reader he loves his seizures, because they set him free and allow his spirit to leave his body and soar above the heights of Seattle.

Ending Shawn's suffering appears to be Sydney McDaniel's motivation for interviewing Earl Detraux and possibly ending his own son's life at the end of the novel.

Helplessness vs. Control

Having cerebral palsy leaves Shawn completely helpless. He cannot defend himself against humans or nature. He is continually forced to place his own life in the hands of those around him. Shawn despises feeling helpless, but because he completely lacks muscle control, there is nothing he can do about this. Only during his seizures is Shawn able to obtain a sense of control over his own body.

This helplessness renders Shawn incapable of communicating his desire to live to his father. Shawn attempts in multiple ways to make this known, through meditating on this desire and dreaming of this desire. These attempts, however, are futile and are not heard by Shawn's father.

Death

Death is an overarching theme that aches Shawn's consciousness throughout the narrative. Shawn wonders what death will be like. He notes two different types of death: the suffering form resulting in a void of nothingness, such as he witnessed with the death of the dog and the peaceful form of death that might feel like flying.



By the end of the novel, Shawn concludes he is not ready to die and does want to live. However, Shawn recognizes his lack of control in this area and submits himself to the mercy of his father who, Shawn resolves, must know the best alternative.

Love

Shawn describes two types of love in the narrative. First, there is the type of devotional love that one feels for family. This is the kind of love that Shawn feels for his parents and siblings and he imagines they must feel the same emotion. He recognizes the importance of this emotion, but notes that it is not all inclusive. This form of love does not allow them to see Shawn for who he truly is. With only this type of love, Shawn will be continually misunderstood.

Shawn experiences the second form of love when he first meets his sister's friend, Ally. He describes this type of love as a warm, tingling sensation. Shawn realizes he has a very slim chance of ever fully feeling this form of love with someone of the opposite sex, but he holds onto the hope he might someday have this opportunity. He thinks if someone loved him enough in this way, then she might be able to see who he truly is and help him escape the entrapment of his body.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrative is given through Shawn's perspective, through his thoughts. Shawn cannot speak or communicate in any way with the other characters in the book. His only form of communication is with the reader. Additionally, the reader only receives a window into Shawn's life through his observations. Therefore, if Shawn's eyes cannot focus on something, or if he undergoes a seizure and his spirit leaves his body, the reader is taken with him and misses out on other pieces of the narrative that may be occurring simultaneously.

Shawn's narration is very much attuned to that of a fourteen-year-old boy. He lusts after girls, swears occasionally, and stresses over events in his life. For this reason, the reader becomes extremely connected to the human characteristics that make Shawn an individual. The reader cares about Shawn and wants to help him be heard. However, like Shawn, the reader cannot communicate with other characters in the text and has no means of stopping Shawn's father from killing his son.

This intimate connection between Shawn and the reader draws the reader into the narrative. The author's writing style, which is informal and colloquial. This further draws the reader into Shawn's world, allowing the reader to experience his life in a way that the characters in the book will never be able to.

Setting

The novel is set at Shawn's house in Seattle, Washington. Almost all of the events occur in the home, with the exception of the reading of Sydney McDaniel's poem, the incident with the dying dog, and a few other minor memories.

Language and Meaning

Because the novel is narrated through the mind of a fourteen-year-old boy, the language fits his personality. This is extremely fitting for the novel, as the target audience is young adults around the same age range, who will be readily able to identify with the way Shawn thinks and portrays his emotions.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters. Beginning with chapter 5, each chapter contains a stanza of Shawn's father's Pulitzer Prize winning poem. The stanzas help drive the plot line forward and provide the reader with further insight into the relationship between father and son and the father's inability to cope with his son's disability.

The novel contains one main plot and a few minor subplots, which weave together to create a more complete narrative. The main plot follows Shawn's attempt to piece together evidence that his father really is trying to kill him. The subplots mainly occur through memories as Shawn recalls what life was like before his father left. Another memory details his father's success and reception of the Pulitzer Prize.



Quotes

I just happen to have this one talent that I know makes me gifted and special – yuck! I hate that word ‘special’ when it’s applied to people. As in ‘he’s a very special person.’ Geez! Who isn’t! (Chapter 1)

Experiencing life the way I have – that is, only through what I see and hear – has made it hard for me to really understand some things. I’ve seen people run, but I have no idea what your legs feel like when you do that. What does your arm feel like throwing a baseball? Your fingers holding a pencil? What do your lips feel like when you kiss somebody? (Chapter 2)

The dog died. His eyes seemed locked onto mine at that moment when life left him; I wasn’t watching the dog then, I was looking at death looking back at me. (Chapter 3)

What if I hadn’t been here?’ I could hear his fear. ‘What if your mom ran in to grab that phone, planning to only be gone a minute or two, and that devil had taken your eyes while she was gone? (Chapter 4)

The whole scene felt terrible. Being celebrated for something you are not, being completely misunderstood by people who think they’re being understanding is awful. (Chapter 5)

I don’t know when a seizure will strike, but when it does, it’s like a miracle. (Chapter 6)

As he reached for the door handle, he glanced back over his shoulder one final time. I happened to be looking directly at him. There was something in his expression that I’d never seen before, a look in his eyes that I can’t describe. (Chapter 7)

The doctors have assured us, a thousand times, that it’s almost impossible that Shawn could have any awareness, but it’s that ‘almost’ that makes it intolerable for Syd. (Chapter 8)

Aside from everything else, if I were loved enough to be truly known, maybe that could save my life. (Chapter 9)

I think that your father believes that his work might help other families with kids like Shawn. (Chapter 10)

Have you ever wondered if a definition of love might not include taking responsibility for someone who cannot take responsibility for his or her self? (Chapter 11)

Cindy says, ‘I always feel so guilty complaining about it all. (Chapter 12)

Memory is all we have, for ourselves and for the people we love. (Chapter 13)



Dad says, 'You're gone, you became an angel because I let you go. Double-jointed thumbs, just you and me. I had to let go. (Chapter 14)

I feel relaxed, content. I float aimlessly; I am at peace. (Chapter 15)

Either way, whatever he does, I'll be soaring. (Chapter 16)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Is Sydney McDaniel attempting to play “God” by ending his son’s life? Is it right for him to contemplate ending Shawn’s suffering? Explain.

Topic 2

Discuss the relationship between Shawn and his father. In a number of points through the book they are compared as being one in the same, such as their commonality of double jointed thumbs. How are these characters related? Why are they described as being the same person? Explain.

Topic 3

What does Paul do to the strangers who attempt to burn Shawn? Is this action justified? What might have happened if Cindy did not come out and stop Paul? What does this tell us about Paul as a character?

Topic 4

Why does Shawn love his seizures? What happens to Shawn when a seizure takes hold of his body? How does this give Shawn a sense of control that he would not otherwise have?

Topic 5

Can we, as readers, trust Shawn’s narration? Due to his seizures and inability to have control over his body, Shawn almost never gets the full story. He is forced to piece things together. Should readers trust Shawn’s interpretation? Or, is there another side that Shawn might be missing?

Topic 6

Discuss disability. What affect do disabilities have on characters in the novel? How does Shawn’s disability affect the stability of his family? How does it affect his father? his mother? his siblings? Most importantly, how does Shawn view his disability? How does it affect his life?