

Sway Study Guide

Sway by Kat Spears

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Plot Summary

Jesse Alderman is known by the nickname Sway because of his ability to influence everyone around him. He runs several business operations including hiring intelligent students to complete homework assignment for less academically gifted students, procuring alcohol for high school parties, and dealing drugs. Jesse kept himself busy so that he could avoid the painful emotions caused by his mother's death a year before the narrative of the novel took place. He developed a cold, detached, and cynical view of humanity which meant he felt no empathy for other people and felt no guilt about his own actions.

Jesse's life changed when the captain of the football team, Ken Foster, paid Jesse to help convince Bridget Smalley – a beautiful and selfless senior who volunteers at a center for disabled children - to date him. Jesse followed Bridget and introduced himself to her in order to gather information to help Ken, but in the process Jesse ended up falling in love with Bridget and befriending her younger brother Pete who suffers from cerebral palsy.

Jesse quickly gathered enough information to help Ken convince Bridget to date him by pretending that they shared common interests. Ken and Bridget became a couple. Although Jesse didn't like it when Ken and Bridget started dating, he convinced himself it was for the best because he believed he wasn't emotionally capable of being in a romantic relationship. Jesse's friendship with Bridget's younger brother Pete developed and the two boys became close friends. Jesse took Pete to parties, nightclubs, and to the home of a local drug dealer. Bridget and Pete's parents became concerned that Jesse was a bad influence.

Ken became jealous of Jesse's growing friendship with Pete and was convinced that Jesse was only using Pete in order to get closer to Bridget. Ken beat up Jesse in the school parking lot and warned him to stay away from Pete's birthday party. Jesse ignored Ken's warning and attended the birthday celebration along with Ken, Pete, Bridget, and their parents. Ken confronted Jesse and threatened him again. To defend himself, Jesse claimed he only befriended Pete as a way to help Ken get closer to Bridget and said that he didn't really care about him. Pete overheard their conversation and found out that Ken had paid Jesse to set him up with Bridget. Although Pete initially told Jesse he wasn't going to tell Bridget about his arrangement with Ken, he later went back on his word and told Bridget the truth at the homecoming dance.

Bridget was extremely angry about the revelation. She broke up with Ken and refused to speak to Jesse. However, Jesse still cared about Bridget and used all of his influence and 'sway' to make sure that the Special Olympics event she was planning for disabled children was a success. He used his leverage with the school principal to make sure Bridget was granted permission to hold the event at their high school and convinced an elderly friend to donate enough money to fund the event.

Although he believed he'd ruined his chances with Bridget, their relationship proved to Jesse that he was still capable of feeling deep emotions. Jesse hadn't played his guitar since his mother's death, but in the final chapter he performed with his guitar in public and Bridget saw the performance. Jesse apologized to Bridget and, at long last, they kissed.

Prologue – Chapter 8

Summary

In the opening line of the novel high school senior Jesse Alderman paraphrases a quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet, stating that nothing is either good or bad but only thinking makes it so. Jesse claims this quote is the only useful thing he's ever learned at high school. He compares being at school to being at prison and shares his theory that real power doesn't come from telling people what to do, but being able to give people something they want but can't get. Doing this, Jesse says, is his talent.

In the next section of the Prologue, Jesse recounts the story of being attacked in the school parking lot by another student named Ken. Ken attacked Jesse and accused him of trying to steal his girlfriend Bridget. After Ken left, Jesse got into his car and drove to a disused suspension bridge over a river. Jesse described how far the drop is to the water, commenting that if someone was to jump from the bridge there would be very little chance they would survive. Jesse wondered whether his story will have a happy ending, or whether he would be better off jumping from the bridge.

In Chapter One, Jesse spoke to his friend David. Jesse pays David to write term papers which Jesse sells to other students for a profit. David told Jesse that he didn't want to be paid in cash any more. He wanted Jesse to get Jesse's ex-girlfriend - a girl from their school named Heather Black - to go out with him. Jesse told him he would arrange it. Next, Jesse spoke to the school principal, Mr. Burke, who hired Jesse to frame a student named Travis Marsh so that Burke would have a reason to expel him. Jesse agreed to the plan.

In Chapter Two, Jesse visited the high school football player Ken Foster's house to deliver some kegs of beer he had procured for the football team. Ken told Jesse that he wanted Bridget Smalley to be his girlfriend and that he wanted Jesse to arrange for her to go out with him. Jesse was surprised by the request because he assumed that a guy like Ken could get any girl he wanted, but he agreed to help him. Jesse agreed to do a lot of things for a lot of people during this day, but his narration reveals that he likes to be busy because it stops him from thinking.

In Chapter 3, Jesse visited Digger, a local drug dealer who supplied Jesse with the marijuana he sells at school. Digger lived in a trailer park on the outskirts of town. He passed Jesse a bong, which Jesse accepted. Jesse's narration reveals that Digger once spent six years in prison. After he left Digger's trailer, Jesse called Heather Black and asked her to have dinner with him.

In Chapter Four, Jesse went home in the evening. When he arrived his dad wasn't there, which his narration tells readers was not a surprise. Jesse found his friend Joey in his living room. Joey didn't want to stay at her own home because her mom's new boyfriend was there and Joey didn't like him. Joey had collected some fake IDs for

Jesse to sell at school. Jesse teased Joey about the time she collected fake IDs with the wrong details on them and Joey complained it only happened because she gets freaked out when she has to see Jesse's associates Skinhead Rob and Grim.

In Chapter 5, Jesse visited the school guidance counsellor Ms. Fuller. In his narration, Jesse explained that the school required him to regularly meet with her because they were worried he was the sort of person who might harm himself or other people. Ms. Fuller showed genuine concern for Jesse's wellbeing but Jesse deliberately manipulated her emotions so that she would convince his teachers to go easy on him.

In Chapter 6, Jesse followed Bridget Smalley to the Sunrise Assisted Living old folks' home. Inside, he met an elderly resident called Mr. Dunkleman, who Jesse convinced to pretend to be his grandfather. Jesse took Mr. Dunkelman outside as an excuse to introduce himself to Bridget and her grandmother. Mr. Dunkelman blackmailed Jesse by threatening to tell Bridget the truth unless Jesse agreed to take him to a football match at the weekend.

In Chapter 7, Jesse drove Bridget to a center for children with special needs called the Siegel Center where Bridget volunteers. At the center, Jesse met Bridget's younger brother Pete, who has cerebral palsy. Later that night, Jesse went home and found his dad in the living room with a woman. His dad asked Jesse to play his guitar for the woman, but Jesse lied and said he had sold it. The narration reveals that Jesse still has the guitar but hasn't played it since his mom died.

In Chapter 8, Jesse met with Gray Dabson, the president of the school council and agreed to help him raise money for the homecoming committee. Jesse bumped into Ken in the corridor and told him he didn't yet have enough information about Bridget to get her to go out with Ken.

Analysis

The Prologue introduces readers to the first person narrator of the story, but readers do not yet find out his name. The comparison of high school and prison is a central metaphor of the novel and will be repeated throughout the story.

The Prologue begins midway through the story, meaning that the following chapter is a flashback which begins to explain the events of the Prologue. The rest of the chapters tell the story chronologically as readers gradually discover the significance of the events in this opening section. Readers learn a lot of information about Jesse and what is going to happen to him, but readers don't yet know the significance of the details that appear in the Prologue. Readers learn he is in love with a girl called Bridget, that he is friends with her little brother, and that Bridget's boyfriend is angry with him.

The quotation from Hamlet recurs throughout the novel and the themes of the play are very similar to the themes of the novel. Like Jesse, the character of Hamlet is a troubled young man who contemplates suicide after the death of one of his parents. Although readers do not yet know that Jesse's mom committed suicide, the story of her death is

foreshadowed in the Prologue when Jesse discussed how easy it would be to commit suicide by leaping from the bridge.

Chapter 1 extends the metaphor of high school as a kind of prison. Readers see Jesse in his natural element, roaming the halls of the school, demonstrating his influence among the other students and his ability to make anything he wants happen. Jesse is depicted in this chapter like a drug dealer from typical crime and prison stories, but in the unusual setting of a high school. Humor is infused into these scenes when, instead of drugs, readers discover that Jesse is dealing in homework. Mr. Burke, as the principal of the school, is depicted as the equivalent of a prison warden worried about the possibility he will lose his authority. The irony in this scene is that Burke has no real authority and instead has to turn to Jesse for help dealing with an unruly student.

Chapter 2 is the first time anyone refers to Jesse by his nickname, “Sway”. When Ken called him Sway, the narration reveals how much Jesse disliked his nickname, hinting that although Jesse appears to be succeeding, he is unhappy with the way other people perceive him. Jesse’s unhappiness is further underscored by the reference in the narration to Jesse’s desire to have no time to think. Readers can sense in this chapter that Jesse is deeply unhappy, but it’s not clear yet why. Jesse’s agreement with Ken to set him up with Bridget is an important turning point in the novel, which will send Jesse down a path which will eventually force him to change his behavior and attitude to life.

In the first two chapters, Jesse’s activities are presented as humorous and impressive, but in Chapter 3 it is revealed that Jesse is engaged in serious criminal activity. He is mixing with dangerous people and taking drugs. The metaphor of high school as a kind of prison starts to become less funny in Chapter 3 when it is revealed that Jesse is engaged in activities that could result in him being sent to a real prison, just like Digger.

Continuing the concerns raised by Chapter 3, readers find out more about Jesse’s illegal activities and dangerous associates in Chapter 4. Readers are introduced to Jesse’s best friend Joey. Both Jesse and Joey are being raised by a single parent with whom they have a difficult relationship. One of the main themes of the novel is Family Relationships. Jesse and Joey form their own family unit to replace the broken relationships they have with their parents.

At this stage, it’s only known that Jesse doesn’t have a mom and that he lives alone with his dad, who is often not around. In this Chapter 5, it becomes clear that whatever happened to Jesse’s mom, it was especially unpleasant and has made the school administration seriously concerned about Jesse’s physical and emotional wellbeing.

Chapter 6 compares the Sunrise Assisted Living Center to a prison, just as earlier chapters have compared Jesse’s high school to a prison. Mr. Dunkelman is the equivalent of Jesse in the old folks’ home. Like Jesse, Mr. Dunkelman spends his time thinking of how he can manipulate and benefit from the people around him, and he has come up with detailed plans of how easy it would be to rob the place. The pair forms an unlikely bond when Jesse realizes that Mr. Dunkelman is just as wily and manipulative as he is. Mr. Dunkelman eventually becomes a replacement father figure for Jesse.



Readers have known since the Prologue that Jesse eventually falls in love with Bridget, but it's not until he follows her to the old folks' home and the Siegel Center in Chapters 6 – 7 that it's revealed why that happens. Jesse and Bridget are opposites: everything Bridget does is in service to other people, whereas everything Jesse does is aimed at looking out for him. Both of them must learn from the other, so that Bridget can begin to stand up for herself and Jesse can begin to show warmth and vulnerability towards others.

In Chapter 7, the narration focusses on the significance of Jesse's guitar, which is an important symbol of his emotional disconnection from everyone around him. Although it used to be an important part of his life, he hasn't played it since his mom's death. As Jesse becomes closer to Bridget and others around him, he also becomes closer to his abandoned guitar.

In Chapter 8, Gray Dabson pointed out that Jesse would be helping the entire school if he volunteered his services for free, but Jesse refused to help unless Gray agreed to do Jesse a favor in return. This underscores the difference between Jesse and Bridget: she is happy to volunteer her time to people who need her help, but Jesse is selfish and only interested in what's in it for him. When Jesse met with Ken in Chapter 8, he lied to him because he was beginning to have second thoughts about setting him up with Bridget. His emotional connection to Bridget was threatening to affect the way he runs his business.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author use the Prologue to prepare the reader for what will happen in the rest of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Jesse has more doubts about helping Ken date Bridget than he does about setting up David Cohen with Heather Black. Why is this? What is different about Ken and David as people and how do their relationships with Jesse differ?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Jesse tell his dad that he had sold his guitar?

Vocabulary

ornate, liability, orbited, conspiratorially, supplication, intriguing, suppressed, brokering, delinquents, ultimate, quaint, inexplicably, hardscrabble, paranoia, surveillance, cartels, entrepreneurial, mediocrity, innovative, narc

Chapters 9 -16

Summary

In Chapter 9 Jesse went out for dinner with his ex-girlfriend Heather to try to convince her to go out with his friend David. In Chapter 10, Jesse took Mr. Dunkelman to a football game. Mr. Dunkelman revealed that he has a poor relationship with his family, and that none of his children or grandchildren ever visited him at the old folks' home.

In Chapter 11 Jesse found Bridget's little brother Pete waiting for him by his car after school. Jesse took Pete to Digger's trailer, where Pete took a hit from Digger's bong. After they left the trailer, Jesse took Pete to get something to eat at a diner.

Chapter 12 details how Jesse and Joey framed Travis Marsh by planting drugs in his locker in order to fulfill Jesse's promise to the Principal to find a way to have Travis expelled. In his narration, Jesse reports that he later learned that Travis spent six months in prison because of Jesse and Joey's actions. Jesse's friend Carter came to visit him after school. In the narration, Jesse revealed that he often finds his dad passed out drunk on the living room couch and that Jesse has to get him to go to bed. Carter and Jesse talked about whether either of them has ever been in love.

In Chapter 13 Joey told Jesse that Ken wanted to see him and Jesse arranged to meet him on the bleachers after school. Jesse admitted in his narration that he didn't want to fulfill his arrangement with Ken by giving him information about Bridget, but he did it anyway. He told Ken to go to an art exhibition where he would bump into Bridget. Jesse told Ken that Bridget likes to ask people what superpower they wish they had and told him what answer to use when she asked him. Jesse went home and got drunk on his dad's whiskey. He went downtown to a bar where his dad was playing a gig and sat in the back row watching his performance. He made sure his dad couldn't see him and left the venue without ever telling his dad he had been there.

In Chapter 14 Jesse was playing cards with Mr Dunkelman at the old folks' home when Joey called him and asked for his help. Jesse went to Joey's house and noticed she had been crying. He drove her to a nearby park and Joey explained that her mom's new boyfriend Roy had made unwanted sexual advances towards her and that she wasn't going home until her mom broke up with him. Jesse told her not to worry and that he would take care of it.

In Chapter 15, Jesse, Carter and their friend Darnell ambushed Roy outside a bar. Jesse threatened him and told him to break up with Joey's mom. Jesse left Darnell and Carter with Roy and they beat him up in an alleyway.

In Chapter 16 Jesse went to a high school football game. After the game he found Bridget and asked Ken to stay with her while she waited for her dad to pick her up. Jesse lied and told Bridget that Ken had a cousin with Down's Syndrome and Ken didn't

correct him. Bridget suggested that Ken should volunteer at the Siegel Center with her and he agreed.

Analysis

Chapter 9 further highlights Jesse's lack of emotional connections. When Heather asked him if he'd been seeing anyone else since they broke up, Jesse replied that some people are better on their own. Although Heather used to be his girlfriend, Jesse showed no empathy or interest in her as a human being instead treating her as a pawn in his business deals.

Mr. Dunkelman has ended up isolated in his older years due to his lack of positive relationships with his family and readers can see through his situation a possible future for Jesse if Jesse doesn't learn to open up and emotionally connect to the people around him. In Chapter 10, Mr. Dunkelman warned Jesse that when Jesse gets to his age, he will realize that the only things that matter are the people you love, but Jesse insists he knows better. Jesse continued to think that everyone is only really interested in looking after themselves, not selflessly helping the people they love.

Chapter 11 is the beginning of Jesse's friendship with Pete which is arguably equally important to the story as his romantic relationship with Bridget. Jesse and Pete have a lot in common. They have both suffered a more than average amount for boys their age, Jesse due to his mother's suicide, and Pete due to his cerebral palsy. When Jesse takes Pete to Digger's trailer he opens Pete's eyes to a whole world that he was unaware of. However, this doesn't seem to be entirely positive as we worry that Pete will become sucked into the criminal underworld that Jesse hovers on the edges of.

Jesse tried to rationalize his treatment of Travis Marsh in Chapter 12 by jokingly suggesting in his narration that the state were going to pay for Travis's care and feeding in any case and that Travis had a better chance of earning his high school diploma from prison than he did from their school. This chapter is an important part of Jesse's characterization, because it shows his complete lack of empathy for the people who suffer as a result of his actions. Later in the novel, Jesse's remorse over his mistreatment of Bridget and Pete contrasts starkly with his feelings about Travis Marsh, and this contrast demonstrates how much Jesse grows as a character during the course of the book.

The conversation about love with Carter in Chapter 13 is revisited at the end of the story, when Jesse has reconnected with his emotions and has realized that he is in love with Bridget.

In Chapter 13, readers start to realize that Jesse's narration is not entirely reliable. Although Jesse implied frequently that he doesn't like his father and has a poor relationship with him, the actions that Jesse described in this chapter paint a different picture. When Jesse found his dad drunk and asleep on the couch, Jesse made sure to wake him and get him to go to bed. Although Jesse claimed he did this so he could

avoid seeing his dad in the morning, his actions portray someone who cares about his father and who wants to look after his wellbeing. The way Jesse described his motivation in his narration doesn't match up with his actions, making him an unreliable narrator.

Chapter 13 also demonstrated Jesse's yearning for emotional connections, firstly when he felt resistant to handing over information about Bridget to Ken, and then again when he watched his dad play music without revealing that he was there. His mom's death has left him feeling too vulnerable to reach out to other people. His desire for a closer relationship with his dad is underscored when Jesse decided to watch him play on the same day that he has betrayed Bridget's trust by revealing information about her to Ken. Having betrayed his burgeoning emotional connection with Bridget, Jesse attempted to reach out to his father, but couldn't bring himself to do it. In an echo of the narration in Chapter 12 - in which Jesse took care of his father while claiming to dislike him - readers see once again that, despite what Jesse claims in his narration, he cares deeply for his father and longs to have a closer emotional connection with him.

Although Jesse regularly proclaims his lack of emotional connections in his narration, it is clear from the moment Joey is introduced in Chapter 4 that she is important to Jesse. When Joey is threatened by Roy in Chapter 14, Jesse's bond with her and his feelings of responsibility towards her are highlighted. Lacking any real family relationships, Jesse took action to protect his surrogate family from harm. Jesse took unselfish action in this chapter, in an effort to protect someone he has an emotional connection with, which shows progress for a character who has previously proclaimed that his only motivations are selfish ones. However, because his actions were disturbingly violent and criminal, it remains clear that Jesse still has a lot of problems he needs to solve before he can have normal relationships. When Darnell and Carter assault Roy in Chapter 15 it foreshadows the moment later in the novel when Jesse is attacked by Skinhead Rob and Grim.

In Chapter 16, Jesse's narration reveals why he betrayed Bridget and willingly set her up with Ken. It was not because he didn't care about her, but because he believed that he was a bad person and that he would inevitably hurt her. He said: "In the real world Beauty doesn't fall for Beast and live happily ever after. In the real world, Beast deflowers Beauty. Beast breaks Beauty's heart." We discover from this piece of narration that Jesse's inability to form emotional bonds is not due to the lack of value he places on other people, but because he doesn't value himself. He believes that he isn't worthy of relationships with others and it is this obstacle that he must overcome before he can recover the emotional connections he lost when his mom died.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Jesse choose not to tell his dad that he had been to see his gig?



Discussion Question 2

In what ways are Jesse and Mr. Dunkelman similar? In what ways are they different?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the character of Joey important in the novel, and why does Jesse protect her?

Vocabulary

decor, flounces, manifest, demise, convert, impediment, irreverently, transact, paranoid, yearning, mandatory, malaise, empowering, enterprising, plight, surreal, spiel, vantage, tendrils, hackles

Chapters 17 - 24

Summary

In Chapter 17 Jesse attended the car wash he organized to raise money for the homecoming committee. While he was there he saw Courtney, a college cheerleader who is the daughter of some friends of Jesse's parents. Jesse spoke to Courtney about how things had been since his mom's death.

In Chapter 18 Jesse noticed that Bridget and Ken had become a couple. He spoke to David Cohen who was struggling for money because it was so expensive dating Heather Black. Jesse concluded that he would need to recruit a replacement for David because he didn't trust him to take as much time and care over the homework assignments Jesse had employed him to complete.

In Chapter 19 Jesse hung out in a diner with Pete and Pete complained that he would never be able to get a girlfriend because of the way he looked. Jesse told Pete he was going to visit Skinhead Rob but warned Pete that he wasn't allowed to come with him this time, because Skinhead Rob is dangerous.

In Chapter 20, Jesse visited Skinhead Rob. When Rob revealed an interest in Joey, Jesse made a mental note to never ask her to go to Rob's for him again. Rob is a racist and his basement is decorated with swastikas and has a bookshelf full of racist material. Rob told Jesse that his friend Grim warned him not to trust Jesse because Jesse is a Jew. Rob's younger sister tried to do some laundry while he was talking to Jesse and Rob verbally abused her before shoving her and threatening to give her a black eye.

In Chapter 21, Jesse took Pete to a party. Jesse lied to some girls there by telling them that Pete was a wealthy student from Switzerland and explained Pete's limp and facial disfigurement by claiming he had been injured in a skiing accident. Jesse spoke Bridget at the party but she left him to go be with Ken.

In Chapter 22, Jesse tracked down Pete at the party and discovered he was drunk. Jesse drove Pete and Carter to a diner for breakfast and Pete revealed that he'd fooled around with two girls at the party. Pete asked Carter why people called Jesse "Sway" and Carter, an African American, explained it's because Jesse is "so slick, he could convince you I'm white, have you believing it like it's gospel."

In Chapter 23, Jesse reflected on the problems his various schemes had caused for Principal Burke: Ken was so busy volunteering at the Siegel Center that the football team's results were starting to suffer and the star student David was so obsessed with Heather that his grades were starting to slip, leading him to lose the local Battle of the Brains contest and making the school look bad in the process. A geeky student named Andrew tried to hire Jesse because he thought Jesse would be able to make him popular, the way he did for Pete. Andrew explained to Jesse that he wanted to be just



like him because everyone likes Jesse: everyone knows him, he gets invited to all the parties, and all the girls want to date him. Jesse snapped at Andrew and asked him: “You think people like me? Is that what you think?”

In Chapter 24, after going for dinner with Darnell and Carter, Jesse went home. He was about to go to sleep when Bridget called him. Bridget told him that she had been drinking. She’d had a big fight with her parents and left the house without telling them where she was going. Bridget asked Jesse about his mom and he explained that she committed suicide. He told Bridget the story of the time he got a concussion when he was 12 years old. He was hit by a van while riding his bike. His friends described the incident to him, but he didn’t remember anything about it.

Analysis

Jesse’s conversation with Courtney in Chapter 17 is significant because it is the first time Jesse has openly discussed his mom with any other characters. When Joey and Carter mentioned his mom, Jesse immediately shut down the conversation, but with Courtney he is able to reveal his emotions to a greater extent. Even with the school guidance counsellor, Jesse refused to openly discuss his mom’s death. Although they are not really related, the two have known each other since they were very young and Courtney tells the other cheerleaders that Jesse is her little brother, furthering the theme of surrogate family relationships. Through Jesse’s conversation with Courtney, readers are given a glimpse of what Jesse was like before his mom died and it’s clear that he used to be able to form strong emotional connections with other people before he was traumatized by the suicide. This provides hope that one day Jesse will regain his ability to reconnect with his emotions and form close relationships.

In Chapters 18 and 19, readers are presented with two very different stereotypical takes on the nature of relationships between men and women. David, a self-confessed nerd, feels that it is necessary for him to spend an excessive amount of money in order to keep his girlfriend Heather interested in him. David’s schoolwork and employment with Jesse is threatened because of his new obsession with spending. Pete believes that relationships are forged solely on the basis of physical attraction and because of his disability he thinks this means that he will never be able to get a girlfriend. Pete told Jesse that Jesse is really lucky because he could get any girl he wants and used the waitress as an example of a woman flirting with Jesse because of his looks and charisma. However, Jesse and the readers know that Jesse can’t form any emotional relationships at all due to the trauma of his mom’s death and that this is a much greater obstacle than either David or Pete face.

Skinhead Rob has been referenced throughout the novel, but does not appear until Chapter 20. Jesse’s announcement in Chapter 19 that he is about to visit Skinhead Rob builds tension because readers have heard many frightening and disturbing things about him so far. Although Jesse was happy to take Pete with him to meet Digger the drug-dealer, he refused to allow Pete to join him this time. First, this highlights just how dangerous Skinhead Rob is. Further to this, it shows Jesse’s growing friendship with



Pete and his desire to take care of him. Jesse was considering Pete's safety rather than his own convenience, showing that their friendship was becoming more important to Jesse. Jesse was beginning to treat Pete in a similar way to the way he treats his closest friend, Joey.

Once again, through his attitude towards Joey, it is revealed in Chapter 20 how much Jesse cares about his surrogate family members. When he realized that Skinhead Rob might be a danger to Joey he decided never to send her there again, even though this would be an inconvenience for many of Jesse's business deals. Despite his claims to the contrary, Jesse is capable of acting unselfishly when it comes to protecting the people he loves.

In Chapter 20 the author made a subtle criticism of the Narnia Chronicles by C.S. Lewis and The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand, when Jesse pointed out in his narration that Skinhead Rob's bookshelf features Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* and a book called *Eugenics* (the name for a discredited social movement which sought to "improve" society through selective breeding and sterilization). By listing Lewis and Rand's work alongside these other titles, the author suggests that people who hold racist views along the same lines as the Nazis would also enjoy the work of Lewis and Rand, implying the author believes that these other authors were racists. Rob's violent relationship with his younger sister will become important later in the novel when Jesse attempts to extract himself from this criminal underworld.

In Chapters 21-22, Pete experienced a little bit of what it's like to be Jesse. He was successful with the girls at the party because Jesse lied to them about who Pete really is. Although he was excited, Pete was also concerned that it only happened because of a lie. Pete doesn't realize that this is how Jesse always feels: that people think he's great, but that it's all a lie. Carter intended to praise Jesse when he explained why people call him "Sway" but his explanation highlights that Jesse's reputation and popularity is dishonest and based on his ability to lie to people. Carter's explanation helps readers realize why Jesse hates his nickname: it is a symbol of his inability to have an open and honest connection with the people around him.

When Jesse implied to Andrew that people don't really like him in Chapter 23, it highlighted how shallow most of Jesse's relationships are. Most of the people around Jesse are interested in what he can do for them, not in Jesse as a person.

Chapter 24 is a key turning point in the novel. It is the first time Jesse discussed what happened to his mom with any of the other characters and is also the first time readers get the full story of what happened. The suicide was foreshadowed in the Prologue, but this chapter is the first time it's confirmed that Jesse's mom killed herself. This is a big step forward in Jesse's relationship with Bridget because he showed he was willing to talk to her about something which he refused to discuss with the school guidance counsellor or with his closest friends Joey and Carter.

Jesse's story about being concussed as a child is a metaphor for what happened to Jesse when his mom died. He explained to Bridget: "It's like my brain decided to protect



me from the whole experience, didn't let me remember the crash, how it felt". He compared this experience to how he felt when his mom died: "Just like that period of time was wiped out when I was knocked unconscious – my mind won't let me feel anything". The story of Jesse's concussion explains the emotional state of Jesse's character. Readers now understand why he is incapable of forming emotional connections with other people. It's not because he is selfish or thoughtless, but because he cut himself off from his emotions when his mom died. This conversation with Bridget is Jesse's first step towards reconnecting with his emotions.

Discussion Question 1

Why do people call Jesse "Sway"? Why doesn't he like the name?

Discussion Question 2

How is Bridget affected by Pete's disability?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Andrew want to be like Jesse? Do you think it would be enjoyable to have Jesse's life?

Vocabulary

leer, grotesquely, oblivious, therapeutic, throng, debauchery, spawn, dank, ideologies, disposition, extricate, microcosm, confounded, eclipsed, inscribed, anarchy, superficial, ruckus, eccentric, quintessential

Chapters 25 - 32

Summary

After volunteering together at the Siegel Center, Jesse and Pete went to a diner with Bridget and Ken and Bridget's friend Theresa in Chapter 25. At the diner, Ken took Bridget away to talk to some of his friends and Theresa told Pete and Jesse a story about how Ken had made fun of her weight in front of all of his friends. Theresa explained that she didn't want Bridget to hear this story because she knew how upset Bridget would be with Ken.

In Chapter 26, Jesse attempted to collect his share of the profits from the homecoming fundraiser from Gray Dabson, but Gray insisted he didn't have access to the money and couldn't pay Jesse. In lieu of payment, Jesse demanded that Gray fix the vote for homecoming queen to ensure that Theresa would win.

In Chapter 27, Bridget told Jesse that her Special Olympics event for the children at the Siegel Center had to be cancelled because Principal Burke refused to give his permission for it to be held at the high school. Jesse spoke with Principal Burke and reminded him that he owed Jesse a favor after he helped to get Travis Marsh expelled. Jesse demanded that Burke give Bridget permission to host her event at the school and he agreed.

In Chapter 28, Jesse took Pete to a nightclub where he encouraged Pete to dance with some girls. In the following chapter they went to a bowling alley where everyone from their high school hangs out. They bumped into Bridget. Pete became very angry with Bridget and started yelling at her. Jesse punched Pete in the face to get him to stop. Ken intervened and told Jesse to leave the bowling alley.

In Chapter 30, Bridget called Jesse to tell him that Pete was missing and that her parents were really worried. Jesse went looking for Pete and found him standing on the same bridge Jesse visited during the Prologue. Pete complained to Jesse about how difficult it can be dealing with a disability and Jesse told Pete disturbing details about his mom's death and about how his dad found her dead in their bathroom. Jesse called Bridget to tell her Pete was safe and then the two boys went to the diner. Jesse promised Bridget he would call her back later but never did.

In Chapter 31, Jesse walked with Bridget after they'd both been to the Siegel Center. Bridget invited Jesse to come to Pete's birthday dinner with her family. She confronted Jesse about his refusal to let himself care about anyone. She suggested it was because of his mom's death. Jesse was angry with her for trying to talk about his mom and they argued. Jesse offered to drive her home but Bridget refused and caught the bus instead. Jesse followed her bus in his car and saw that she'd gone straight to Ken's house.

In Chapter 32 Jesse saw one of Bridget's friends being bullied at school and he intervened to stop the bullies. Joey asked Jesse why he hadn't been selling any drugs recently.

Analysis

After his conversation with Bridget about his mom's suicide, readers begin to see signs of a real change in Jesse's character. In the diner in Chapter 25, he admired the loyalty Theresa showed towards Bridget when she refused to tell her something about Ken that would upset her. Because Jesse cares about Bridget he wanted to reward Theresa for being a good friend to her. Instead of holding Gray Dabson to his word and demanding the money he's owed, or requiring a favor that would benefit Jesse personally, Jesse used his leverage to do something kind for Theresa.

Jesse took his unselfishness a step further in the following chapter when he traded his most valuable favor - from the indebted Principal Burke - for a chance to make Bridget happy. However, his conversation with Bridget in this chapter reminds readers that much of their relationship is founded on lies. Bridget asked Jesse whether his mom's death was difficult for Mr. Dunkelman, not knowing that Jesse lied when he told her that Mr. Dunkelman was his grandfather.

Jesse's friendship with Pete reaches a turning point in Chapters 28-30. Jesse serves an important function in Pete's life. Due to his disability, everyone around Pete is always nice to him and tries not to criticize him, but because of this Pete has grown accustomed to being rude and unkind to people without having to face the consequences. When it comes to his friendship with Pete, Jesse's emotional detachment is a rare advantage because it means he doesn't sympathize with Pete's problems and is therefore comfortable pointing out to Pete when he's being unkind or unfair. Pete can learn valuable lessons from Jesse about the way he treats other people, which is ironic as Jesse himself treats other people quite badly.

When Jesse talked to Pete about his mom's suicide in Chapter 30 he was admitting that Pete is important to him. This is a topic he has only ever discussed with Bridget, so their conversation on the bridge is symbolic of the fact that Pete's friendship is just as important to Jesse as his relationship with Bridget.

Bridget understands why Jesse is unwilling to let himself get close to other people and in Chapter 31 she attempted to force him to face his fears. This backfired when Jesse became angry and mean in an attempt to push her further away. Bridget's actions made Jesse feel vulnerable and he retreated further away from her rather than coming closer as Bridget had hoped he would.

Although Bridget feels that Jesse is pushing her away, readers understand how much Jesse wants to be close to her when he followed her bus to make sure she got home safely. The moment is poignant because Bridget is unaware of this tender gesture or how much she means to Jesse. In Chapter 32 readers once again see Jesse do

something selfless for Bridget's sake when he rescues her friend Clint from some bullies but, once again, Bridget is unaware of Jesse's actions.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Jesse arrange for Theresa to win Homecoming Queen?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways are Jesse and Pete similar? In what ways are they different?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author present the family life of the Smalleys?

Vocabulary

persecution, tirade, bustle, subdued, crescendo, fatigue, averted, admonishing, spittle, profusely, intervene, futile, groggy, ironic, bastardized, normalcy, refraction, subtle, shrivelled, immaculately, etiquette

Chapters 33 – 39

Summary

In Chapter 33, Ken found Jesse after school and beat him up. He told Jesse not to come to Pete's birthday dinner. Jesse ignored the warning and joined Pete, Bridget, their parents, and Ken for the birthday dinner. Ken spoke to Jesse alone and got him to talk about the fact that he had paid Jesse to set him up with Bridget. Jesse told Ken that the only reason he was friends with Pete was to help Ken succeed with Bridget. After saying this, Jesse realized that Pete was behind him and had heard everything Jesse had said.

In Chapter 34, Pete told Jesse that he was angry for the way he had treated him, but even angrier about the way Jesse had treated Bridget.

In Chapter 35, Jesse heard that Pete was having surgery and he went to visit him in the hospital. When Jesse left the hospital he was attacked by Skinhead Rob and his associate Grim. Jesse called Carter who drove him to Joey's house where they tried their best to patch him up. Jesse told them that he wanted to die.

In Chapter 36, Jesse took Andrew – the geek from school who wanted to hire Jesse to make him more popular – to visit Digger the drug-dealer's trailer. Jesse told Digger that he wasn't going to deal drugs anymore and that Andrew was his replacement. During the homecoming dance in Chapter 37, Pete told Bridget the truth about Jesse and Ken's arrangement.

In Chapter 38, at Bridget's Special Olympics event for the kids from the Siegel Center, Jesse apologized to Pete for his behavior. Jesse tried to buy a hot dog from Pete, but Pete demanded that Jesse admit that Pete is his best friend before he would serve him. Jesse told Pete he was his best friend and that he missed him. Pete served Jesse a hot dog.

In the final chapter Jesse played his guitar at a gig for the residents of the old folks' home. Bridget was there visiting her grandmother and she sat down to listen to Jesse play. Bridget told Jesse that Joey had told her about all the things Jesse had done for her: that he'd arranged for Theresa to win homecoming queen, that he'd got Principal Burke to agree to hold the Special Olympics event at their school, and that he convinced Mr. Dunkelman to donate money for the event.

Jesse apologized to Bridget and told her how much she meant to him. They kissed.

Analysis

In Chapter 33, the narrative catches up with the Prologue when Ken attacked Jesse after school. Readers now understand all of the events that led up to the assault.



Jesse's newly formed relationships began to unravel when Pete found out that he had been lying to him and to Bridget. Although the reader knows that Jesse's feelings for both Pete and Bridget are genuine, the series of lies that he told to form his relationships with both of them have now caught up with him and there is no way for him to reframe his actions in a positive light.

Chapter 34 marks a turning point for Pete's characterization when he told Jesse that he was more upset by Jesse's mistreatment of Bridget than the lies Jesse told Pete. Pete usually only thinks about himself and his own suffering, so the empathy and concern he showed for his sister in this chapter demonstrates that Jesse has been having a positive effect on him. Pete is beginning to show more consideration for others.

The emotional consequences of Jesse's actions caught up with him at Pete's birthday dinner in Chapter 33. The practical consequences of his criminal behavior caught up with him outside of the hospital when he was attacked by Skinhead Rob and Grim in Chapter 35.

The assault echoes the earlier incident with Joey's mom's boyfriend Roy. Earlier it was Jesse who was in the position of power as he ordered Carter to attack Roy. Now it is Skinhead Rob in the position of power, and readers see how few options Jesse has for protecting himself in this grown-up world.

There can be no doubt at this point that Jesse must change if he is going to save his relationships with Bridget and Pete and save himself from the dangerous people he has been associating with. In Chapter 36 Jesse used his considerable skills to remove himself from the criminal underworld by training geeky Andrew as his replacement. Andrew will become Jesse's replacement as the high school's drug dealer. This is a dark and somewhat troubling plot twist, as it implies Andrew is destined to suffer similar emotional problems to Jesse in the future.

Although many unpleasant things have happened to Jesse – Ken beat him up at school, Pete refused to be friends with him anymore, and Skinhead Rob assaulted him outside the hospital – the worst moment comes when Bridget finds out Jesse was paid to set her up with Ken in Chapter 37. Because Jesse didn't tell Bridget about any of the kind things he had done for her, she could only see the lying and the manipulation. This is Jesse's lowest point, but it motivated him to change his ways. He used all of his remaining favors to ensure that the Special Olympics was a success. He did this entirely unselfishly and with no expectation that he would be rewarded or congratulated for his efforts. This is a contrast to Jesse's attitude when Gray Dabson asked him to volunteer his services for the homecoming fundraiser and showed how much Jesse had grown as a person during the course of the narrative.

In the final chapter, Jesse played his guitar again, symbolizing that he had recovered his ability to feel emotions. Once he had reconnected with his emotions, Jesse was finally able to tell Bridget how he felt about her. In the narration, Jesse referred back to an earlier conversation he had with Carter about what it felt like to be in love. Once he got together with Bridget, Jesse found out what love felt like.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author show the dangers of committing crime?

Discussion Question 2

What effect does Bridget have on Jesse?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways is Jesse different at the end of the novel compared to his characterization at the beginning of the novel? In what ways has he stayed the same?

Vocabulary

enunciated, inbred, mirth, offhand, impromptu, rendition, stoic, transcended, lingered, cloddish, chivalry, deflower, profanities, savagery, disfigure, feigned, wrath, wayward, accentuate, trafficking

Characters

Jesse Alderman / Sway

Jesse is the central character / protagonist. Jesse is a high school student in his senior year. He makes his own money and supports himself by dealing drugs at his school, as well as hiring students to write class assignments which he sells to other students, and fulfilling any other favors and requests brought to him by the student body at large. Because he is so convincing, and because of his ability to make money by making things happen, he has earned the nickname “Sway”: a slang term indicating that someone is cool, successful, and admired.

Readers learn through the narration that Jesse’s mom killed herself a year before the story of the novel took place. After his mom’s death his dad became depressed and distant, leaving Jesse alone to fend for himself. As a result of this, Jesse became detached from his own emotions and refused to allow himself to form close relationships with other people, because he was afraid of being hurt.

At the start of the novel, although Jesse appeared to be popular with other students, he was only interested in whether he could make any money from them or, even better, whether he could extract some information or a favor from them that he could use for his own benefit. Jesse’s lack of interest in selflessly helping other people was vividly depicted when the chairman of the homecoming committee, Gray Dabson, asked Jesse to help him organize a fundraiser. Gray suggested to Jesse that he should be willing to waive his usual fee and volunteer his services for free because the fundraiser would benefit the entire student body, but Jesse refused to get involved unless he personally received a share of the profits.

Things started to change for Jesse when the captain of the football team, Ken Foster, paid Jesse to get a girl called Bridget Smalley to date him. Bridget is the love interest in the novel and she functions as the catalyst for change in Jesse’s life. Through his relationship with Bridget, Jesse started doing selfless things for other people and reconnected with his own emotions.

Gradually, throughout the novel, Jesse started to do selfless things for other people when he knew those things would make Bridget happy: he arranged for Bridget’s friend Theresa to win Homecoming Queen and convinced their principal to allow Bridget to hold an event for children with special needs in their high school gymnasium.

The most significant sign of change in Jesse’s character is symbolized by his guitar. Readers are reminded repeatedly, through the narration and by other characters, that Jesse had not played his guitar since his mom died. The guitar is the symbol of Jesse’s disconnection from his emotions and when he played it in public at the end of the novel, it was a sign that he had recovered from his emotional block.

Bridget Smalley

Bridget is another senior at Jesse's high school. Jesse met Bridget when he was paid by the football captain Ken Foster to convince her to date him. Although Jesse's interest in Bridget is only financial to begin with, after spending time with her he developed romantic feelings which threatened to complicate his business dealings with Ken.

For the majority of the novel Bridget was unaware of the deal made between Jesse and Ken. Because her character is unaware of important facts in the story, she plays a passive role in the narrative. Her function as a character is more emotional than practical. She never meaningfully contributed to the events of the novel or the way they unfolded. Instead, she provided emotional support and witnessed the plans and actions of the male characters whose decisions drove the events of the plot.

Bridget's personality is directly contrasted with Jesse's personality in order to highlight the ways that Jesse needs to grow as a person. Bridget's behavior is the opposite of Jesse's. Whereas all of Jesse's actions were selfishly motivated, everything Bridget did was aimed at selflessly helping other people. When Jesse first met her, he followed Bridget after school and saw her visiting her grandmother at an old folks' home and then volunteering at a center for children with special needs.

Bridget felt pressured by her parents to be a perfect child because her younger brother Pete had cerebral palsy, which was a serious emotional and financial strain on her parents. Bridget wanted to make sure she never let her parents down because they had already suffered so much because of Pete's disability. Bridget's selfless nature meant that she would rarely stick up for herself and would allow her brother Pete to say rude and hurtful things to her.

Pete Smalley

Pete Smalley is Bridget's younger brother who has cerebral palsy. Jesse met Pete when he followed Bridget to a center for children with special needs where she was volunteering. The two boys struck up a friendship and Jesse became a mentor figure for Pete.

Pete felt isolated by his disability. He believed that no girls would ever want to date him because he walked with a limp and his face was lopsided. Because people felt sorry for him, no one would ever tell Pete when he was being unpleasant or rude, meaning that his social skills were underdeveloped. He was especially unkind to his sister Bridget, who Pete resented because she was so perfect. Pete later became more sympathetic to Bridget and told her about Jesse's agreement with Ken.

Jesse's friendship with Pete is arguably just as important in the novel as his romantic relationship with Bridget, and Pete is just as much a catalyst for change in Jesse's life as Bridget is. Jesse never intended to gain any benefit by spending time with Pete and hung out with him and helped him improve his social skills purely because he enjoyed

his company and valued his friendship (although Jesse did not admit this to Pete until near the end of the novel). When Pete discovered the agreement between Ken and Jesse he suspected that Jesse was only pretending to be his friend in order to get more information about Bridget. Eventually, he forced Jesse to admit that their friendship was important to him by refusing to serve Jesse a hot dog until he told Pete that he was his best friend. When Jesse admitted this to Pete, it was a big step forward on his quest to reconnect with his emotions.

Ironically, the lack of empathy caused by his mom's death made Jesse the ideal friend for Pete. Unlike those characters who felt sorry for Pete, Jesse's emotional problems made him incapable of sympathizing with Pete's disability and as a result of this Jesse was the only person in Pete's life who treated him like a normal person.

Joey

Joey is Jesse's best friend. She is a lesbian goth and her friendship with Jesse is purely platonic.

Family is an important theme in the novel. Jesse and Joey provided a surrogate family for each other because their real families didn't fulfil their emotional needs. Joey has a difficult family situation similar to Jesse's. Her dad isn't around and her mom brings home abusive and unpleasant boyfriends who Joey can't stand. When Joey's mom's boyfriend made inappropriate sexual advances toward Joey, Jesse arranged to have the man beaten up. Later in the novel, when Jesse was beaten up by a local drug dealer, Joey took care of him.

Like Jesse, Joey struggled to express her emotions but the narration revealed that Jesse knew that their friendship was important to her. It was Joey who told Bridget about all of the selfless things Jesse did for her sake. Although she never expressed this sentiment to Jesse in person, her actions showed how much Jesse meant to her.

Ken Foster

Ken is the captain of the high school football team. His character functions as the antagonist in the novel. His role as antagonist was introduced in the prologue, when Ken attacked Jesse in the school parking lot. Jesse's goal in the novel is to develop a relationship with Bridget but Ken prevented him from doing that by becoming Bridget's boyfriend himself. Both Ken and Jesse's relationships with Bridget are founded on lies: both boys got to know her after they struck an arrangement whereby Jesse would come up with a plan to convince Bridget to date Ken.

Ken lied to Bridget in order to become her boyfriend by pretending to have similar interests to her and claiming that he had a cousin with Down's Syndrome. Although these actions make Ken appear to be an unpleasant character, his behaviour towards Bridget is really no worse than Jesse's. It was Jesse's suggestion to lie about his interests and it was Jesse who invented the cousin. However, it is revealed that Ken is

also cruel and unkind to other students and that he made fun of Bridget's friend Theresa because she was fat.

Ken deliberately made sure that Pete found out about his agreement with Jesse. This revelation made it look as if Jesse's relationship with the Smalley siblings was superficial and self-serving, even though Jesse cared sincerely about both Pete and Bridget.

Mr. Dunkelman

Mr Dunkelman is a resident at the Sunrise Assisted Living Center. Jesse met him when he followed Bridget when she went to visit her grandmother. Jesse convinced Mr Dunkelman to pretend to be his grandfather. Of all the lies Jesse told Bridget, this is the only one he doesn't ever confess to. Mr Dunkelman is cynical, manipulative, and has poor relationships with his biological family, much like Jesse. However, also like Jesse, he has a softer side which was shown when agreed to make a donation to fund Bridget's Special Olympics event. He becomes a replacement father figure for Jesse.

Skinhead Rob

Skinhead Rob is a criminal who supplies Jesse with drugs to sell. He is a racist who displays Nazi symbols and books written by Adolph Hitler in his basement. He is physically and verbally abusive towards his younger sister. When Jesse failed to return his calls, Rob and his friend Grim violently assaulted Jesse in a parking lot. In order to escape his drug dealing lifestyle, Jesse concocted a successful plan to get Rob's younger sister to help get Rob sent to prison.

Digger

Digger is a drug dealer who supplies Jesse with the drugs he sells at his high school. Digger lives in a trailer park, smokes a lot of marijuana, and watches the television show "Sons of Anarchy" with Jesse. Digger is contrasted with the other drug dealer in Jesse's life: Skinhead Rob. Whereas Skinhead Rob is depicted as dangerous and violent, Digger is depicted as comic and sentimental. This was especially apparent when his response to Jesse's announcement that he won't be dealing drugs anymore was to worry that Jesse will stop coming to visit him and they won't be able to watch TV together anymore.

Carter

Carter is another student from Jesse's high school. The pair discussed what it meant to be in love and admitted that neither of them knew the answer. Carter violently attacked Joey's mom's boyfriend under instructions from Jesse and Carter was the first person Jesse called after he was assaulted by Skinhead Rob. Although Jesse and Carter are



good friends, Jesse is not as close with Carter as he is with Pete. The lack of closeness and understanding between Jesse and Carter is symbolized by Carter often calling Jesse by his nickname “Sway”. Carter is unaware how much Jesse hates his nickname.

Gray Dabson

Gray is the president of the student council. He hired Jesse to help improve the fundraising events for the homecoming committee. His enthusiasm and dedication to volunteering in ways which help the whole student body is contrasted with Jesse's refusal to do anything selfless.

Heather Black

Heather is Jesse's ex-girlfriend. Jesse's friend David asked Jesse to set him up with Heather in exchange for the homework assignments David wrote for Jesse's many clients. Heather's function in the novel is to provide a contrast with Bridget. Jesse's narration informs readers that Heather is only really interested in money and how much a boyfriend would spend on dates with her. This contrasts with the less superficial relationship Jesse has with Bridget.

Theresa

Theresa is a friend of Bridget Smalley. Bridget's boyfriend Ken bullied Theresa because she was overweight, but Theresa decided not to tell Bridget about it because it would upset her. Jesse admired Theresa's loyalty to Bridget and arranged for Theresa to be voted Homecoming Queen as a reward. This was a selfless action taken by Jesse which demonstrated his fondness for Bridget and his desire to help anyone who was kind to her. Theresa complained that no one would ever want to date her because she was overweight, which echoed Pete's feelings about his disability.

Ms. Fuller

Ms. Fuller is the head guidance counsellor at Jesse's school. The school are worried about Jesse's mental health in the aftermath of his mom's suicide, so Ms. Fuller paid special attention to him. Jesse took advantage of this attention by using her concern as a way of making sure his teachers would go easy on him. Ms. Fuller only appears in one chapter and her only role in the novel seems to be underlining the idea that adults are worried about Jesse.

Principal Burke

Principal Burke hired Jesse to frame another student called Travis Marsh so that Burke would have an excuse to expel him. As a result of this deal, Jesse had leverage over

Principal Burke when he refused permission for Bridget to hold her Special Olympics event at the school. Being owed a favor from Burke was a valuable asset for Jesse, so when he agreed to trade that favor for something he wouldn't benefit from personally, it was a clear sign that Jesse was starting to change his ways. Although he is supposed to be an authority figure, Burke is depicted as being incapable of controlling his students, in contrast to Jesse, who effortlessly manipulates everyone around him.

Symbols and Symbolism

Guitar

Jesse's guitar is symbolic of his relationship with both of his parents and the emotional disconnection that his family relationships have caused him. The thing that made Jesse's mom fall in love with Jesse's dad was when his dad would play songs to her on his guitar. Jesse did not play his guitar for more than a year after his mother's suicide and he finally played it again in the last chapter of the novel. Jesse performed with his guitar in the Sunrise Assisted Living Center because he knew that Bridget would be there visiting her grandmother. Bridget was moved by Jesse's performance, just like Jesse's mom was impressed by his dad.

Earlier in the novel, Jesse told his dad that he sold the guitar to pay for groceries. Although it was a lie, this claim symbolizes Jesse's relationship with his own emotions. He pretended that he sold an item of emotional significance (the guitar) in order to purchase items which are necessary for survival (the groceries). This lie is symbolic of Jesse's belief that it was essential for his survival to disconnect from his emotions after his mom's death.

Bridge

The suspension bridge across the river in Jesse's town is used as a symbol of despair and suicidal thoughts. The bridge is no longer used by residents of the town because a newer, more convenient, bypass had been built reflecting the fact that Jesse and Pete both go to this bridge when they feel abandoned and like no one around them cares about them anymore. In the prologue, Jesse contemplated suicide whilst standing on this bridge and when Pete returned there later in the novel it raised concerns that Pete might also consider ending his own life.

Music

Jesse is a big music fan and uses his relationship with music to judge the value of the people around him and to define his relationship with others. When Pete suggested that Jesse might like to date one of the waitresses at the diner, Jesse concluded that he wasn't interested in her because the open mic night she attended was evidence that she had poor taste in music.

Music is also an important part of Jesse's relationship to his father. Jesse is unable to express his feelings to his father directly so he does it indirectly through music, such as when he plays his father's Simon and Garfunkel records for Carter. Although Jesse claimed in his narration that he has no feelings for his father, this was undermined when Jesse went in secret to listen to his dad perform without letting him know that he was there.

In the chapter where Jesse and Bridget become closer over the phone, they began the conversation by talking about David Bowie. Later, as Jesse's feelings for Bridget became more serious, he imagined a playlist of love songs which he would like to make for her. In the final chapter, Jesse performed some of these songs for Bridget.

Jesse's Car

Jesse's car is a symbol of his independence. When Pete first saw the car he told Jesse how lucky he was that his parents had bought it for him and Jesse replied that he had paid for it himself. It symbolizes Jesse's self-reliance and the success that his various business opportunities have afforded him. But it also symbolizes his isolation: both times that Jesse is beaten up (by Ken and later by Skinhead Rob and Grim) it is in a parking lot next to his car. After the first assault Jesse drove to the suspension bridge and contemplated suicide. After the second assault he had to rely upon the friends in his surrogate family when he called Carter who took him to Joey's house. The car is a symbol of his independence but can't provide the support that Jesse needs after these two incidents: only his friends can do that.

Cerebral Palsy

Pete's physical disability is used as a symbol of his emotional disabilities. Pete believes that all of the difficulties he has relating with other people are caused by their prejudices and assumptions about the way he looks. Jesse thinks that Pete's real problems are with his attitude and personality and that he needs to learn to treat people better before he can have meaningful relationships. This stance is ironic coming from Jesse, who needs to learn the same lesson. When Pete meets Bridget's friend Theresa his attitude to his disability is challenged. Theresa faces many of the same problems as Pete does because she is overweight, meaning people make assumptions about her personality and value as a person based on the way she looks. Despite this, Theresa is a charismatic and funny person who volunteers with children with special needs and who is a loyal friend to Bridget, showing that no one has to allow their disadvantages in life to define what kind of person they are.

Cellphone

Jesse's cellphone is a symbol of his power and influence as well as symbol of his emotional disconnection from everyone around him. Jesse faces a constant barrage of calls and text messages from friends and associates asking him for favors and checking in with him about business deals. When Jesse started to ignore his calls and messages it was a sign that he was moving away from his old life. He would no longer respond to messages from Skinhead Rob because he was too focussed on doing unselfish things for Bridget. When Jesse first told Bridget about his mom's suicide, he did so over the phone. He mentioned in his narration that being on the phone made him feel distant from Bridget and that he wished she was there in person instead.

Siegel Center

The Siegel Center is a center for children with special needs where Bridget volunteers. When Pete was born with cerebral palsy, the center helped the Smalley family adapt to life with a disabled child. In the novel, the center itself becomes a symbol for the varying attitudes towards disability taken up by different characters. For Bridget, who volunteers regularly with the children, the center is a symbol of hope and the possibility of being able to do good in the world. For Pete, the center represents his feeling that his disability makes him an outcast: when he joined Bridget at the center he always stood on the side-lines, never participating in the activities. Jesse's relationship with the Siegel Center demonstrates his changing character traits. When he first met Bridget he was perplexed as to why anyone would volunteer their time for no reward, but by the end of the novel Jesse traded in some of his most valuable favors in order to make a Siegel Center event successful.

Sports

Sports are used as a symbol of community values. Jesse's relationship with Mr. Dunkelman grew into something more meaningful after they went to a football game together. Bridget's "Special Olympics" sporting event was the catalyst which allowed Jesse to express his feelings for Bridget by behaving unselfishly and helping to make the event a success.

Homecoming

The plot points surrounding homecoming serve to symbolise Jesse's disconnection from other students his age. When Gray Dabson asked Jesse to help with fundraising for homecoming he expected Jesse to volunteer because the funds would benefit the entire student body, but Jesse refused because he was still only interested in looking out for himself. When Jesse intervened to fix the results and make sure Theresa won Homecoming Queen it was an early step towards reintegrating with the rest of the students.

Bong

The bong at Digger's trailer is a symbol of membership in the criminal underworld. In Chapter 3, it was revealed that Jesse was involved in dealing drugs. When Digger passed Jesse the bong, it was symbolic of Jesse's total immersion in illegal activities. Later, Jesse took Pete to visit Digger and Pete was offered the bong, symbolizing Pete being influenced by Jesse. Finally, when Jesse took Andrew to visit Digger, so that Andrew could become his replacement, Andrew's initiation into his new role was sealed when he accepted a hit from the bong.

Hot Dog

At the Special Olympics event, Pete was working on a hot dog stall and refused to serve Jesse unless Jesse admitted that Pete was his best friend and that he missed him. The hot dog that Pete served Jesse became a symbol for their friendship and for their repressed emotions. It allowed Jesse to pretend he only admitted his feelings for Pete because he wanted the hot dog.

Settings

Wakefield High School

The experience of being at high school is likened to the experience of being in prison, with similar hierarchies and systems of authority. Wakefield is depicted as a raucous and disorderly environment with frequent episodes of bullying. Despite this, the high school is the location where Jesse is at his most confident. He is able to navigate the different tribes with ease, even taking a quick detour through the teachers' lounge. Jesse is in his element here, only facing his darker emotional troubles outside of the school environment.

Bridge

The suspension bridge is a location both Jesse and Pete go to when they are distressed and unsure about what to do next. In the prologue narration Jesse contemplated suicide when he visited the bridge and, as a result of this, the bridge has a sense of foreboding and danger attached to it when Pete returns there later in the novel.

Jesse's House

Jesse's house is an unstable location for Jesse because he can't predict who will be there when he gets home. Often his dad is away on tour meaning Jesse is alone in the house. However, at one point in the novel Jesse returns home to find his dad there with a woman he picked up in a bar.

The house serves as a sanctuary for Joey and she goes to Jesse's house uninvited and lets herself in whenever the situation at her own home becomes too much for her to deal with.

Diner

The diner is a focal point for socializing in the novel. Jesse goes there to eat with many of the other characters including Pete, Carter, Darnell, Bridget, Theresa, and Ken. Many of the chapters set in the diner give the characters an opportunity to discuss topics which do not drive the plot forward but which add richness and depth to their characterization. Examples include when Pete and Jesse discussed whether Pete could ever get a girlfriend, when Theresa talked about how much judgement she faced because she is overweight, and when Carter, Darnell, and Jesse discussed racism and their shared love of Wu-Tang Clan.



Bleachers

The bleachers at the high school football field are Jesse's preferred location for doing business while at school because he enjoys watching the girls' Lacrosse team practice. This location is strongly associated with Jesse's unethical behavior, as it is the location of most of Jesse's business interactions with Ken Foster. It is here that he collects his initial payment from Ken and after a football game at this location Jesse leaves Bridget alone with Ken after inventing the lie that Ken had a cousin with Down's Syndrome.

Sunrise Assisted Living Center

It is at the Sunrise Assisted Living Center that Jesse first met Mr. Dunkelman, who later became a member of Jesse's surrogate family. The center means different things to different characters in the novel. For Bridget, it is an opportunity to take care of other people: she goes there in order to visit her grandmother. However it is not such a positive location for other characters: Mr. Dunkelman likens the care home to a prison and Bridget's delusional grandmother believes it is a Nazi concentration camp. In the final chapter Jesse performed a concert with his guitar at the Sunrise Assisted Living Center, an act which demonstrated how much he had changed as a person.

Skinhead Rob's Basement

Skinhead Rob's basement is decorated with Nazi symbols and filled with racist books. The location frightened Jesse and is one of the only places in the novel where Jesse was uncomfortable and didn't feel or behave as if he was in control of the situation. This is important for Jesse's characterisation because it proved that he wasn't as capable of dealing with everything alone as he claimed to be.

Digger's Trailer

Digger's trailer is the location where Jessie first learns that Jesse is involved in dealing drugs. However, unlike Skinhead Rob's basement, Digger's trailer is a comic setting and Jesse is confident and in control when he visits here.

Siegel Center

Whereas Wakefield High School is the setting where Jesse is most in his element, the Siegel Center for children with special needs is where Bridget feels most at home. It is depicted as a loud and raucous environment, like Wakefield, but unlike the high school the Siegel Center is presented as a safe and happy place. The children who attend the center are happy and exuberant and are always excited to see Bridget.

Themes and Motifs

Emotional Detachment

The central theme of the novel is Emotional Detachment. The journey that Jesse's character takes is defined by his progression from someone who is closed off to his own emotions to someone who is able to connect with others on an emotional level.

Jesse had to work hard during the novel to maintain his level of emotional detachment. Early on, he explained in the narration that the main reason he kept himself so busy with different jobs and schemes was because it prevented him from having time to think. He needed to consciously stop himself from having emotional thoughts in order to carry on functioning. Initially, the emotions that did break through the barriers that Jesse had built did so in a dysfunctional way. Jesse didn't allow his emotional detachment to stop him from sympathizing with Joey and helping her when her mom's boyfriend Roy made unwanted sexual advances towards her. However, in this instance, Jesse's response was criminal: he had Carter and Darnell violently assault Roy in order to warn him to stay away from Joey and her mom.

Jesse explained his motivation for making a deliberate attempt to detach from his emotions by comparing it to a road accident he was involved in when he was 12 years old. Jesse told Bridget that when he was 12 he was knocked over by a van when he was riding his bike. Jesse hadn't been wearing a helmet at the time of the accident which resulted in him getting a concussion. The concussion was severe enough that it meant Jesse had no memory of the accident occurring and the only details he knew about it were stories he'd been told by his friends who saw what happened. He explained to Bridget that it felt like his brain was trying to protect him from the trauma of the accident by making sure he couldn't remember anything about what happened or how it felt. He likened this to what happened after his mom's death: Jesse felt as if his brain shut down his emotional responses in order to stop him feeling the pain and grief caused by his mom's suicide. It is clear from this story that Jesse's apparent lack of empathy isn't a result of Jesse being a bad person, but is instead Jesse's attempt to protect himself.

Jesse's guitar is the main symbol of emotional detachment. Jesse didn't play the guitar for more than a year after his mom's death. After Bridget helped Jesse to see the value of connecting with people emotionally, Jesse recovered from his emotional detachment, which was demonstrated when he performed with his guitar at the Sunrise Assisted Living Center. Through Jesse's transformation, readers struggling to deal with their own painful emotions are offered hope that it is possible to move past painful and traumatic experiences and to feel positive emotions once again.

Disability

Disability as a theme in *Sway* refers not just to the physical handicaps of Pete and the children at the Siegel Center, but other kinds of emotional and social disabilities as well. In fact, Bridget suggested to Jesse that the children at the Siegel Center should not be thought of as disabled at all: they are just “differently abled”, a more inclusive term intended to encourage a more tolerant and open-minded attitude towards people with physical handicaps. It is perhaps a shame that none of the novel’s main characters embody this positive attitude towards disability. Although minor characters from the Siegel Center are depicted in a positive light, when it comes to the main characters in *Sway*, disability is used as a symbol for deeper emotional problems.

Pete allowed his disability to define his sense of self, believing that no one would ever want to date him because of it. Pete believed his appearance was the main reason he struggled to socialize normally, but in fact it was his inability to empathise with those around him and show kindness and concern for others that resulted in his social isolation. Although Pete is physically disabled, he also has emotional difficulties which arguably cause him more problems than his cerebral palsy. Pete envied Jesse because he believed he didn’t suffer from the same problems that Pete did. However Jesse is also emotionally troubled, which makes it just as difficult for him to form romantic relationships as it is for Pete. When Jesse shared the harrowing details of his mom’s suicide with Pete, it was a step forward in understanding between the two friends because it allowed Pete to see that other people in his life were suffering too, just in less obvious ways than Pete was.

The most serious disability in the novel is the mental health problems that Jesse’s mom suffered. Unlike Pete’s disability, Jesse’s mom’s depression was invisible and, therefore, overlooked by the people around her, eventually leading to her death. Jesse, too, suffers from an “invisible” disability in the form of his emotional detachment which threatens to become a debilitating mental health problem similar to those suffered by his mom.

Family Relationships

Jesse’s biological family have failed to provide him with the level of emotional support that he needs. As a result of this, Jesse formed a surrogate family made up of a disparate group of people all of whom have also struggled to build solid relationships with their biological families. Mr. Dunkelman’s family never visited him at the care home where he resides, so when Jesse came into his life he took on the role of surrogate grandson. Joey lives with her single parent mother and feels unsafe in her home environment because of her mom’s various boyfriends. She too finds a surrogate family with Jesse. Pete has a poor relationship with his parents and his sister because he feels that the way they treat him is defined by his disability, but he finds acceptance with Jesse. This sets up one of the novel’s central thematic contentions: even if you come from a difficult background or have any other kind of disadvantage that makes life

harder for you than it is for other people, it is still possible, and indeed essential, for you to form close emotional relationships with other people and to do your best to take care of those people. The novel therefore offers hope to readers who might be struggling with their own dysfunctional family relationships by demonstrating the possibility of forming meaningful ties with people from outside of their biological family.

Other dysfunctional family relationships in the novel include Skinhead Rob who is verbally and physically abusive towards his sister. Rob's failure to develop a close relationship with his sister ultimately leads to his downfall when Jesse exploited the sister's dislike for Rob in order to have him arrested and sent to prison.

Crime

One of the more controversial themes in the novel is the focus on Jesse's involvement in crime. Jesse was a drug dealer, arranged for a violent attack on a man in an alleyway, and framed another student for such serious crimes that the student went to prison. These actions are part of the dark and sardonic tone of the novel and fit well with Jesse's characterization as an emotionally detached young man incapable of feeling empathy for other people. Jesse did suffer repercussions as a result of his actions, most notably when he was beaten up by Skinhead Rob and Grim in a scene which echoed the earlier assault on Roy - Joey's mom's boyfriend - which was orchestrated by Jesse.

Although he came to regret the way that he treated Bridget, eventually apologizing for lying to her, Jesse never showed any remorse for what happened to Travis Marsh, the student who was sent to prison after he was framed by Jesse for dealing drugs. Jesse's initial lack of empathy for Travis is comedic and light-hearted in a way that is consistent with his characterization in the first half of the novel, but the apparent change of heart he had about his behavior towards Bridget later in the novel makes it seem somewhat unrealistic that what happened to Travis didn't end up weighing on Jesse's conscience. The fact that Jesse only regretted and apologized for his comparatively minor bad behavior (lying to Bridget) lessens the impact of Jesse's emotional transformation at the end of the novel.

Jesse's criminality is tied to contemporary social concerns about violence at schools and emotionally troubled young men committing acts of mass murder. Reference is made throughout the novel to instances of high school shootings and the massacre at Columbine high school in 1999 is mentioned specifically. Although there is no indication in the book that Jesse would attempt to harm other students on a mass scale, nevertheless the argument is made in the novel that by ignoring troubled young men like Jesse - who struggle with emotional disconnection and a lack of empathy - the school system and society at large fail to do everything they can to prevent this kind of crime.

Hamlet

Jesse studied Hamlet by William Shakespeare at school and claimed in the prologue that a quote from the play was the only useful thing he ever learnt there. The original quotation is: "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Jesse adapts this quotation and repeats different versions of it throughout the text. The opening line of the novel is: "Nothing is either good or bad, only thinking makes it so." This quote in particular relates to the theme of emotional detachment: there is no need to become emotional over something, the quote seems to suggest, for it is only the way you choose to respond to events that is important, not the events themselves. Using this motto, Jesse believed he could avoid the pain of his mom's death by simply not thinking about his sadness. The novel takes a different stance, however, instead demonstrating the impossibility of completely detaching from your emotions. No matter how hard Jesse tried, his relationships and bonds with other characters forced him into an emotional response regardless of how hard he tried to use rational thought to detach from his emotional responses.

Jesse's character is also very similar to the character of Hamlet: both texts revolve around a protagonist who is a young man grieving the untimely and tragic death of a parent. The most famous line in Hamlet comes when the character declares: "To be or not to be - that is the question." This is the opening line of a soliloquy in which Hamlet contemplates whether or not to commit suicide. Hamlet's famous contemplation of suicide is used in Sway to foreshadow Jesse's own struggles with suicidal thoughts. Jesse's life has been turned upside down by his mom's suicide and when Jesse reached his lowest point in the novel - after he had been assaulted by Skinhead Rob - he told Carter and Joey that he wanted to die. Hamlet is a tragedy and, although he doesn't commit suicide, the protagonist is killed at the end of the play. In the prologue narration, Jesse wonders whether his own story will have a happy ending or a tragic one. By invoking Hamlet, the author raises the possibility that Sway will also have a tragic end.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told entirely in the first person from Jesse's perspective. The novel uses the technique of the unreliable narrator to reveal different facets of Jesse's personality. Although all of the information we get about the story is filtered through Jesse, the author uses various techniques to show that Jesse's narration isn't entirely honest. A key example of this is when Jesse described what happened when he came home to find his dad drunk and asleep on the couch. Jesse insisted in the narration that he woke his dad and made him go to bed because he didn't want to have to see him when he got up in the morning. But the act of making sure his dad went to sleep on a real bed, combined with the chapter in which Jesse went to watch him play without telling him about it, revealed that Jesse cared more about his father than he was willing to admit.

Jesse shared things in the narration which he would not share with other characters. Often this is used to create humor, for example when the guidance counsellor asked Jesse how his classes were going, he responded in his narration by saying: "A complete fucking waste of time." In the dialogue, however, he replied: "Okay I guess." Jesse's private thoughts in his narration are used to create instances of dramatic irony, where the reader knows something that other characters in the novel do not. For instance, when Jesse finally apologized to Bridget for lying to her, she made reference to Jesse's "grandfather". The reader is aware that this is another of Jesse's lies and that Mr. Dunkelman is not really related to Jesse. The reader shares in the joke with Jesse when he responded in his narration: "My grandfather. Maybe that was a confession to save for another time." Overall the technique builds sympathy for the character of Jesse because the reader is entertained by his humor in the narration and is able to share in his private thoughts and fears. Jesse behaved badly towards a number of characters in the novel, but by having events presented from his perspective the reader can still sympathize with his actions in a way they couldn't if the story had been told in the third person.

Language and Meaning

Jesse is depicted as a character who has dulled his emotions and who lacks empathy for others. To demonstrate this, his choice of words - especially in the narration - is often callous and unkind. Jesse's descriptions of other characters are often highly judgemental and involve insulting or derogatory terms: he called Digger's family "backwoods people", the children at the Siegel Center are described as "freak shows", and he told Pete that he didn't care how beautiful Heather Black was because she had "a really shitty personality." Jesse's tendency to demean others is a source of humor: often it is shocking to read such unpleasant thoughts and the bluntness with which these comments are delivered breaks taboos surrounding the importance of being polite and pleasant to other people. Whereas most of us would not dare (or would not want to) say such cruel things about other people, there is vicarious pleasure in witnessing



Jesse getting away with saying such awful things. The novel features a large number of curse words which some people might consider inappropriate for the intended age range of the readership.

Much of Jesse's language - both in the narration and in his interactions with other characters - comes from the world of business and economics. He refers to his work in terms of "commodities" and "wealth" and when deciding in the narration whether to agree to an offer made to him by another student he described how his brain was "calculating the costs I would have to offset against this transaction". These words come from the world of rational thought and objective facts and the author uses them as a way of demonstrating that Jesse has disconnected from his more emotional and intuitive thoughts.

The text is littered throughout with a wide range of cultural references: when the character of Joey is first introduced, readers are informed she is listening to the Wagner opera *Tristan und Isolde*, and when Carter visited Jesse the two boys listened to a Simon and Garfunkel record. Many of the references Jesse makes seem an unnatural fit for a teenage boy in 2014, perhaps indicating that Jesse's cultural references reflect the author's own interests, rather than being an attempt to realistically portray the interests of a contemporary teenager. For instance the reference to the Columbine massacre of 1999 seems a strange example for Jesse to use as the character would have only been 3 years old when the shootings occurred, and there have been many more equally high profile mass murders in the intervening 15 years. Further to this, the music references often seem to reflect older tastes and eras: Carter, Darnell, and Jesse discuss their love of Wu-Tang Clan which, while not entirely implausible, might have felt like a more realistic conversation between teenagers if it had referred to a more recent group. Even references to contemporary music seem slightly out of date, for example when Bridget complained about having to take Pete to a Maroon 5 concert: hardly the most up-to-date pop music phenomenon amongst teenagers in 2014.

Structure

For the most part, the novel follows a straightforward linear structure except for two key instances: the Prologue and Chapter 33. The Prologue functions as a flash-forward to a later moment in the narrative and covers events that occur long after the events depicted in the Chapter 1. The Prologue establishes lots of key information which will be important throughout the rest of the novel. In the Prologue, Jesse is already in love with Bridget and friends with Pete, and Ken is already aware of both of these facts, although the reader cannot yet understand the significance of these relationships. The assault from Ken creates a sense of foreboding that carries on for the following 32 chapters: no matter what happens, the reader knows that Jesse will eventually reach the point of the story depicted in the Prologue when Ken attacked him. This structure also provides a sense of fate and destiny to the narrative. Although Jesse didn't show much interest in Pete when he first met him at the Siegel Center, the Prologue makes readers aware that their friendship will be central to the narrative of the novel, which gives their burgeoning

friendship a sense of inevitability. Chapter 33 picks up where the Prologue left off and depicts the aftermath of Ken's assault on Jesse.

All the other chapters in the novel follow a linear timeline, but the events of the Prologue provide dramatic irony for the reader because they are aware of which events will become significant later in the story. The structure of the novel serves to add suspense to the narrative firstly by building anticipation about when Ken will attack Jesse in Chapters 1 - 32 and again in the aftermath of Chapter 33, because there is suddenly no road-map for the narrative. After events catch up with the Prologue there is no indication about what will happen next or how the story will be resolved, heightening the tension.

Quotes

Real power, in prison and in high school, doesn't come from telling people when to do what. Real power is the ability to get the inmates what they want – things they aren't supposed to have – which happens to be a particular talent of mine.

-- Jesse (Prologue paragraph 3)

Importance: These words are spoken in the narration and give Jesse the opportunity to explain who he is and what he does. Jesse is describing his influence, his “sway”, and the abilities he describes in this section form the backdrop for everything he does in the novel.

Between brokering term papers, getting juvenile delinquents kicked out of school, and delivering party favors for keggers like Ken's, I barely had time to think. Not thinking was the ultimate goal.

-- Jesse (chapter 2 paragraph Final)

Importance: Although Jesse is hugely successful at what he does, this quotation from the narration demonstrates that he doesn't do it for money or because he wants to be popular. He keeps himself busy to quiet his mind and - readers will later learn – to stop himself from thinking about his mom's suicide.

“The school kept a special eye on me – wanted to make sure I wasn't one of those ticking time bombs who showed up during lunch one day in a black trench coat with an assault weapon to take out a few of the popular kids.

-- Jesse (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: Jesse shows wry self-awareness when explaining why the school keeps a close eye on his behavior. This dark reference to violence lends tension and suspense to the novel, making the reader wonder what has happened to Jesse that was so bad it would make people think that Jesse might murder his fellow students.

I've decided I'm going to like you, even though you don't want me to.

-- Bridget (chapter 7 paragraph 68)

Importance: These words, spoken by Bridget and addressed to Jesse, are indicative of the differences between the two characters. While Jesse happily does unethical and illegal things in order to provide others with what they say they want, Bridget insists on being kind and doing the right thing towards people even when they say that it isn't what they want. Bridget reminds Jesse of these words in the final chapter when they reconcile.

The only two things in this world that really matter are the people who love you – and I don't mean your family. Sometimes the people who love you best have no blood relation to you. But in the end, all that will matter to you are the people who really love you [...] The people who love you, and how often you shit. That's all there is.

-- Mr. Dunkelman (chapter 10 paragraph 23)

Importance: This speech, which Mr. Dunkelman delivers to Jesse at a football game, is the central message of the novel. Although Jesse's life is very busy and full, he eventually learns that none of his money-making schemes are as important to him as the people he loves.

My tone was casual and indifferent, but I could feel bile rising in my throat and I was sick to my stomach. Truly sick. Even though I knew that giving Bridget the blowoff was the right thing to do, I still hated walking away from her, leaving her with Ken.

-- Jesse (chapter 16 paragraph Final)

Importance: This line from the narration marks a significant turning point for the characterisation of Jesse. He has fulfilled his obligations to Ken and been paid for his work, but for the first time he feels bad about what he has done. He is no longer able to completely shut off from his emotions, and his feelings will become more and more intense from this point in the novel onwards.

My point is, no girl is going to look twice at a guy like me because my face is lopsided and I walk with a limp. No one wants lopsided, limping babies, so no one is going to want to sleep with me."

-- Pete (chapter 19 paragraph 21)

Importance: Pete says this to Jesse when he is complaining about how much easier it is for Jesse to get a girlfriend. It is important because it demonstrates how clueless and superficial Pete is. He only sees the surface appearances of himself and other people, meaning he doesn't realize how desperately unhappy Jesse is underneath.

It's just too much fucking work to be in charge of making sure everyone else is happy all the time. It's like they all need me to be perfect. Not just my parents. Everyone. Perfect student. Perfect sister. Perfect daughter. It's exhausting.

-- Bridget (chapter 24 paragraph Second Section, 28)

Importance: Bridget makes this declaration over the phone to Jesse after she has been drinking. It is an insight into her motivation and reveals why she spends so much of her time volunteering and helping other people. It also shows that although her life seems happy and easy on the surface, she is really having a hard time.

I was knocked out for a few minutes. The next day when I woke up I couldn't remember anything that happened right before the accident at all. My friends were with me, saw the whole thing and described it to me, to my parents, but I never could remember. It's as if that piece of my life was just lifted out and taken away.

-- Jesse (chapter 24 paragraph Second Section, 66)

Importance: When Jesse describes this accident to Bridget, it is a metaphor for what happened to Jesse after his mom's suicide.



Just like that period of time was wiped out when I was knocked unconscious – my mind won't let me feel anything [...] I don't know what it was like when I had feelings – it's lost and I can't remember it.

-- Jesse (chapter 24 paragraph Second Section, 69)

Importance: Jesse says this to Bridget and it demonstrates that he isn't a cold, manipulative or unpleasant person. He used to have feelings but hasn't been able to feel any emotions since the trauma of his mom's death.

Bridget took a step toward me and slapped me, hard, across the face. She was the third person in as many days to hit me in the face, but this blow hurt more than the others.

-- Jesse (chapter 37 paragraph 72)

Importance: This quote from the narration indicates how important Bridget has become to Jesse. Although he has lost his business relationship with Skinhead Rob and his friendship with Pete is in jeopardy, he is most concerned about damaging his relationship with Bridget.

It was good to hold her in my arms again.

-- Jesse (chapter 39 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is the opening line of Jesse's narration in the final chapter and the reader might initially assume that he's referring to Bridget, giving the impression that they have reconciled. However, he is actually talking about his guitar. Reuniting with his guitar is in many ways more important than reconciling with Bridget, because it proves that he has recovered his ability to feel his emotions, which was an essential step Jesse had to take before he could make amends with Bridget.