

# **The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry Study Guide**

**The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry by Gabrielle Zevin**

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



# Contents

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry Study Guide.....</a>                        | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>   | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>   | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 1: Lamb to the Slaughter.....</a>                           | <a href="#">6</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 2: The Diamond as Big as the Ritz.....</a>                  | <a href="#">9</a>  |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 3: The Luck of Roaring Camp.....</a>                        | <a href="#">11</a> |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 4: What Feels Like the World.....</a>                       | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 5: A Good Man Is Hard to Find.....</a>                      | <a href="#">18</a> |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 6: The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.....</a> | <a href="#">22</a> |
| <a href="#">Part I, Chapter 7: The Girls in Their Summer Dresses.....</a>               | <a href="#">25</a> |
| <a href="#">Part II, Chapter 8: A Conversation with My Father.....</a>                  | <a href="#">28</a> |
| <a href="#">Part II, Chapter 9: A Perfect Day for Bananafish.....</a>                   | <a href="#">31</a> |
| <a href="#">Part II, Chapter 10: The Tell-Tale Heart.....</a>                           | <a href="#">34</a> |
| <a href="#">Part II, Chapter 11: Ironhead.....</a>                                      | <a href="#">37</a> |
| <a href="#">Part II, Chapter 12: What We Talk about When We Talk about Love.....</a>    | <a href="#">41</a> |
| <a href="#">Part II, Chapter 13: The Bookseller.....</a>                                | <a href="#">44</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>   | <a href="#">47</a> |
| <a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>  | <a href="#">55</a> |
| <a href="#">Settings.....</a>   | <a href="#">59</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>  | <a href="#">61</a> |
| <a href="#">Styles.....</a>   | <a href="#">71</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>   | <a href="#">73</a> |



# Plot Summary

"The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" is just that: the story of A.J. Fikry's life, told in short-story narrative form over the course of two parts and 13 chapters. Each chapter is titled after a book, though there is no pattern to the titles other than the fact that they give a slight hint as to what will be discussed or described in the forthcoming chapter. Each chapter begins with an introduction, which the reader learns early on are book notes from A.J. to his daughter Maya.

At the beginning of the novel, A.J. is a widower who doesn't like living alone but has resigned himself to it. He misses his late wife, Nic, and tends to dream about her when he's upset or lonely. A.J. owns Island Books, the only bookstore on Alice Island, an island in the Cape Cod, Massachusetts, region. His two friends are Daniel Parish, an author, and Daniel's wife Ismay, who is Nic's sister. Knightley Press book rep Amelia Loman comes to visit A.J. during one of his particularly lonely times, and he rejects every book she offers. Soon after, A.J.'s rarest book, "Tamerlane and Other Poems" (referred to almost solely as "Tamerlane" throughout the novel), is stolen from his apartment above the bookstore on a night when he has passed out from drinking too much alcohol. A.J. begins to leave the door to Island Books unlocked, as he believes there is nothing left to be stolen.

Upon returning from a run one evening, A.J. finds the bookstore's door open. He left it unlocked, but he's sure he didn't leave it actually open. When he investigates inside, he finds a toddler named Maya with a note pinned to her from her biological mother, asking the owner of the bookstore to care for Maya because she is unable. Though Maya and A.J. get along well right off the bat, A.J. takes Maya to the police station to see what he should do. Since it's 9 p.m. on a Friday night, Chief Lambiase tells him they'll have to wait until Monday for any help from social services. Before the weekend is over, the body of Marian Wallace, Maya's biological mother, washes up on the shores of Alice Island.

After a weekend of bonding with Maya and realizing that he enjoys the company, A.J. decides to adopt Maya. The two get along well and A.J. learns as he goes in regards to raising a child, though he does enlist the help of Lambiase and Ismay. Maya loves living above the bookstore and spends as much time in the store with A.J. as she can. She has trusted A.J. since the moment she saw him and behaves as such. Maya says "Good morning" to every aspect of the store when she goes down in the mornings, and she watches almost all of the customers who go in and out of the store, learning them by the shoes they wear. She also takes well to Chief Lambiase who, since A.J. adopted Maya, spends most of his off-duty time at Island Books with A.J. and Maya.

Meanwhile, Amelia continues visiting Island Books once a quarter to pitch A.J. the publisher's current list. Sometimes she brings a special gift for Maya. Ismay and Daniel have a bad marriage, as Daniel cheats on Ismay openly and regularly, and Ismay feels unworthy of anything good in life, especially after she has another miscarriage that lands her in the hospital overnight. Ismay continues to spend time around A.J. and



Maya, though Maya doesn't take well to Ismay. Maya does have a crush on Daniel because he's an author, and Daniel is obligatory and treats her as a niece.

Just before Maya starts Kindergarten, A.J. realizes that he has romantic feelings for Amelia after he reads her favorite book, "The Late Bloomer" and has a conversation with her on the phone that makes him nervous. He asks her out on a semi-date for the next time she comes to Alice Island, and the two go to dinner at a local seafood restaurant themed after "Moby Dick". They share a good conversation, which makes A.J. even more interested in her, but Amelia is engaged to an American soldier. The next time Amelia is supposed to come into town for Knightley's quarterly book list, she breaks her ankle and has to cancel. A.J. is desperate to see her, so he asks if they could video conference to talk about the Spring list from Knightley. During the video conference A.J. learns that Amelia is no longer engaged. He is still unsure of how he will get her attention for romance, but as he is a man not given to grand romantic gestures or expression, he broods about it before deciding that he will go visit Amelia in Rhode Island under the pretense of seeing topiary gardens for Maya.

During A.J., Maya, and Lambiase's visit to Rhode Island, A.J. and Amelia become a couple. After traveling back and forth for many months between Rhode Island and Alice Island, A.J. asks Amelia to marry him. Maya is okay with the change in family dynamics, as her and Amelia seem to get along well as friends. A.J. is happier than he's ever been, especially when he sees Maya and Amelia reading either together or near each other at the same time. Amelia moves to Alice Island, though she travels often for her job with Knightley Press.

The day of A.J. and Amelia's wedding, Ismay works up the courage to tell Daniel not only that she doesn't love him anymore, but that she knows Maya is his biological child. Ismay parks the car on the side of the road in order to finish the argument she and Daniel have started. When she does, the car is hit twice, the first time causing her leg to break and the second causing Daniel's death.

Part II fast forwards from Daniel's death to when Maya is in high school. She is taking a creative writing class because she wants to be a writer when she grows up. Her current assignment is to write about someone she wishes she knew better. A.J. and Amelia suggest her mother or her father, but Maya is stuck with writer's block. Finally, she decides to write her own version of her mother's story and she (Maya) came to be left with A.J. Maya's short story, called "A Trip to the Beach", is entered by her creative writing teacher into the county's short story contest. It is chosen as runner-up, but A.J. is still very proud of his daughter, whom he considers to be a writer.

Meanwhile, Lambiase has started his own book club called Chief's Choice Book Club, made up of himself and fellow law enforcement agents. After one of their meetings, Lambiase approaches A.J. to see if A.J. will ask Ismay if she would be interested in going on a date with him. A.J. is surprised but is willing to ask her. Ismay and Lambiase go on a date and find chemistry with one another, thus beginning a romantic relationship. After spending his first night at her house, Lambiase finds a backpack with Maya's name on the outside and A.J.'s stolen copy of "Tamerlane" on the inside. He



doesn't bring up the fact that he knows about it until months later, when he knows the money from selling "Tamerlane" will help A.J.

At this time, A.J. is diagnosed with Glioblastoma multiforme, a type of cancer found on the brain. A.J. doesn't have enough money between his health insurance coverage and his savings to have the surgery that could buy him some extra time, so this is when Lambiase decides to bring up to Ismay that he knows about "Tamerlane". Ismay is thankful to Lambiase that he is kind about the discovery, but she also jumps at the chance to tell her side of the story. She explains how Marian Wallace came to visit her hoping to find Daniel so she could get some financial help for herself and Maya. Ismay admits that she was nasty to Marian Wallace, and that after finding "Tamerlane" out one evening when A.J. was passed out, she took it for Marian to sell and that could be the money she needed. Marian tried selling the book but couldn't because dealers couldn't confirm that it was a legitimate copy of the rare book, and the book ended up getting colored on by Maya during an argument between Ismay and Marian Wallace. "Tamerlane" is anonymously returned to A.J., and he uses money from the sale of it to pay for the surgery and first round of radiation.

Unfortunately, the surgery and radiation do not buy A.J. as much time as they were all hoping. The tumor neither shrunk nor grew, but its position in A.J.'s brain means that A.J.'s general capacities will slowly deteriorate. A.J.'s speech is the capacity that diminishes the fastest, and he finds he cannot speak what he would like to speak to Maya. It's at this point in the novel, shortly before the end, that the reader learns that the introduction to each chapter that is written as a book note to Maya is A.J.'s collection of life lessons from some of his favorite books. It is what he leaves as his legacy to Maya.

After A.J.'s death, Amelia puts Island Books up for sale. Lambiase and Ismay purchase the store and become the new owners of Island Books. A few years after A.J. passes away, Amelia leaves Knightley Press to be a book buyer for a large retailer in Maine. She leaves a note for Jacob Gardner, the man who takes her place at Knightley Press. In her note, Island Books is described as almost the complete opposite as it was in the note Amelia's predecessor left her years ago when she first took over the account. At the beginning, Island Books had a "fledgling" online presence, a strong literary fiction presence but a weak children's literature presence, and the owner, A.J. Fikry, bought nothing he didn't believe in. When Lambiase and Ismay purchase the store, Island Books has a strong online presence, a strong children's section, and Lambiase is described as a strong book-seller who won't take anything unless he knows it'll sell.



# Part I, Chapter 1: Lamb to the Slaughter

## Summary

The intro to Chapter 1 is A.J.'s thoughts on "Lamb to the Slaughter," a book authored by Roald Dahl. He references two characters the reader will meet in the novel, though it is unclear as to whether the girl A.J. speaks of is his late wife Nic or his future wife Amelia.

The chapter introduces Amelia first; she is a sales rep for Knightley Publishing Company. She has taken over for a man named Harvey Rhodes. Amelia is headed to Island Books, the only bookstore on Alice Island and owned by the main character of the novel, A.J. Fikry. Harvey Rhodes has described Island Books and A.J. as a tough place to sell because of their limited customer base as well as A.J.'s incredibly fickle tastes. Amelia takes on the challenge and is optimistic about selling to A.J. On her ferry ride from Hyannis to Alice Island, Amelia thinks about the sad state of her dating life. She is 31 years old and wishes to be married by now, but is happier to be alone than in bad company.

When Amelia arrives on Alice Island she quickly finds Island Books. Her interaction with A.J. is less-than-positive seeing as A.J. gives her a long list of what he doesn't like after she asks him what he does like. The bookstore is described as a purple Victorian cottage on the outside and lined with galleys and advanced review copies (ARCs) in the hallway leading to A.J.'s office on the inside. His office, window-less and crowded, is where Amelia tries to discuss Knightley's winter list. Her toughest sell and also her favorite book is one called "The Late Bloomer," a memoir about a man who married for the first time in his 80s only to lose his wife a couple years later. A.J.'s rude demeanor and dismissal of her book list prompts Amelia to let him know that if he continues his attitude and backwards way of thinking about books and bookselling, his store will eventually close.

After Amelia has left, A.J. closes the store by himself. He remembers conversations with Harvey Rhodes, and wishes Harvey were still the book rep from Knightly Press, mainly for the fact that he knew Harvey loved books as much as he does. After tidying up his store, A.J. tries to eat a frozen dinner but it didn't heat up correctly in the microwave. He throws it against the wall, then gets drunk. His dream involves his late wife Nic, and he remembers the accident, as well as the interaction with Office Lambiase at the hospital when she died. Lambiase references "Lamb to the Slaughter" during their conversation at the hospital, in an effort to connect with and distract A.J. from the fact that his wife had just died.

## Analysis

The first chapter sets the tone of the characters for the rest of the novel. Three of the four most important characters--Amelia, A.J., and Lambiase--are introduced. Even



though A.J. is the main character, he is introduced between the other two. This lets the reader know that Amelia and Lambiase will both be important supports for A.J. throughout the course of this novel.

For Amelia, it's important that the reader know she is passionate about books and unafraid of confrontation. She prefers to look on the bright side of situations and is a professional sales representative who treats the books she sells like her children. She is adamant that she does not sell anything she doesn't believe in, and the narrator is sure to point out that she does not lie about anything she sells. However, because of A.J.'s gruff demeanor, Amelia finds herself embellishing some with her descriptions of a couple books. A.J. has thrown her off her game, which is just a small indication of what is to come and how these characters will work their ways into each others' hearts.

For A.J., the reader knows immediately that he is a lonely man who has gotten so used to being alone that he has forgotten how to interact kindly with others. He doesn't like change, has an aversion to most mainstream literature, and his list of the kinds of books he doesn't like is far longer than the list of the kinds of books he does like. Other indications of A.J.'s loneliness include his dinner of microwaved frozen food for dinner that doesn't heat up properly, the fact that he throws the food against the wall after taking one bite, and his dream-state interaction with his late wife Nic. The reader finds out that A.J. doesn't like when people who used to know Nic die, which is another indication that A.J. does not like change. The author is setting the state of A.J.'s major transformation over the coming years.

As for Lambiase, not much insight is given for his character in this first chapter. He discusses one book with A.J. and is awkward and direct during their interaction at the hospital the night of Nic's death. However, the reader should note that Lambiase is mentioned in the first chapter because he becomes an integral part of A.J.'s life, restoration, and overall story.

The chapter introduction is also part of setting the tone for the rest of the novel. Each chapter begins with A.J.'s notes on a novel. At this point, it is unclear to whom A.J. is writing the notes, but it is clear they are important. A.J. feels there is nothing in the world more personal than books, so sharing his thoughts on a select set of novels is significant. The fact that the first one is "Lamb to the Slaughter," written by a deceased author, is indication that A.J. prefers older literature. It is also an indication that at one point, A.J. felt like his life was moving in a good and happy direction only to have it completely turned upside down upon his wife's death. The author drives that point home when "Lamb to the Slaughter" is not mentioned until A.J. is remembering the night his wife died.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Amelia's reaction to A.J.'s gruffness say about her personality?



## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the sign in front of Island Books that reads, "No Man is an Island; Every Book is a World"?

## Discussion Question 3

What would make the reader think A.J. desires company even when he acts like he wants to be alone?

## Vocabulary

predecessor, per annum, fledgling, literary, persnickety, relentlessly, incompatibility, gift horse, sensibilities, ARC, galley, embossing, memoir, prose, postmodernism, postapocalyptic, postmortem, ghostwritten, ensconced, debut, vindaloo, insufferable, widower, quadriplegic, genre, protagonist





# Part I, Chapter 2: The Diamond as Big as the Ritz

## Summary

A.J.'s notes at the beginning of Chapter 2 come from "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. A.J. addresses a specific person in his notes, but the name of that person is not revealed to the reader.

A.J. wakes from his drunken stupor from the night before and notices that the vindaloo he threw against the wall the night before has been cleaned up. He also finds that "Tamerlane," the most valuable book he owns, is missing. Upon discovering that his book has been stolen, A.J. runs to the police office where he interacts with now-Chief Lambiase. Lambiase tries to calm A.J. down, but to no avail. A.J. ends up going to the hospital because he has an absence seizure while in the police station with Lambiase. At the hospital, his doctor, Dr. Rosen, tells him to get more exercise.

Daniel Parish, A.J.'s brother-in-law, picks him up from the hospital. In the lobby, Daniel is approached by a female fan who is asking for his signature. He is flirting with her when A.J. walks up, and A.J. reminds Daniel that he is married. A.J. and Daniel have a beer together where A.J. states that it's his fault about "Tamerlane," since he's the one who didn't get it insured. The investigation into the missing book lasts a month with no leads. A.J. decides to stop locking his door when he leaves for his runs, because he thinks now that "Tamerlane" is gone, there is nothing left worth stealing.

## Analysis

The intro for Chapter 2 is obviously written to someone young, since A.J. writes, "If you end up going to an Ivy League college...". Still, the reader does not yet know to whom A.J. is writing his notes. It is clear that this person means a great deal to him, since books are incredibly personal to A.J. and he is sharing his thoughts on those personal things. The author foreshadows a little bit at a time throughout "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," and this is one example. It won't be until the next chapter that the reader finds out he is writing to Maya, but the author wants the reader to know that someone young will be coming into A.J.'s life and changing it considerably.

Lambiase's role in A.J.'s crisis is to calm A.J. down. Lambiase has now been present for the loss of A.J.'s two most precious things: his wife and his rarest book. Lambiase's role was indicated in the first chapter, and is only further solidified in chapter 2. He is a calm man who seems to specially and immediately care for A.J. He doesn't make conversation about books this time, but rather listens to A.J. and tries to make sure A.J. is safe before leaving him, i.e., taking A.J. to the hospital after A.J. has a small seizure. Lambiase will become A.J.'s closest friend and confidant.



When the reader meets Daniel, his behavior indicates that he has questionable morals. He is flirting with a woman in the hallway of the hospital, not at all focused on the fact that his brother-in-law was brought to the hospital for a reason. When A.J. reminds him that he has a wife, Daniel seems to relish in the fact that having a wife and flirting with other woman does, indeed, make him a bad man, but that he likes it that way. It is clear A.J. doesn't like his attitude toward the matter, but it is also clear that A.J. has nobody else he considers a friend, and so the two go to the bar and have a drink before Daniel brings A.J. home. The two discuss books, but A.J. doesn't like Daniel's perspective on "Tamerlane." The author continues to show that Daniel is not to be considered a wise character, but more of an immature trouble-maker.

After "Tamerlane" is stolen, the police conduct an investigation that ultimately yields no results. Eventually, A.J. stops locking his door when he leaves the store, which isn't often since he lives in the apartment above the store. Still, the reader should note A.J.'s loss of hope not just for finding "Tamerlane" but for his life: he is leaving himself vulnerable to thieves when he leaves his store full of books--the things he views more valuable and personal than anything else in his life--unlocked. A.J. has become so lonely and sad that without his wife and his rarest book that was to be his financial safety net, he feels he has nothing.

## Discussion Question 1

Given the tone of the chapter intro, who might A.J. be writing to?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Lambiase's attitude toward A.J. say about his character?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some indications, aside from A.J. leaving his door unlocked, that A.J. has given up having a general sense of hope for his life?

## Vocabulary

novella, bumptious, gimmicky, garden topiary, oblivion, detritus, fastidious, unprecedented, auction, provenance, sonorous, sedative, unkempt, narcissistic, moony, vestigial



# Part I, Chapter 3: The Luck of Roaring Camp

## Summary

The reader finds out in the intro that A.J. is writing to a girl named Maya. The chapter intro, comprised of A.J.'s thoughts on "The Luck of Roaring Camp" by Bret Harte, is filled with more sentimentality and is more soft-hearted than the previous two have been.

In the weeks after the robbery, the Alice Island community gives A.J. some sympathy for his losing "Tamerlane" but also suggests to him that his prices be lowered. A.J. listens to his customers kindly but doesn't change a thing about the store. He also keeps his routine of running without locking the front door. The first plot twist occurs when A.J. returns from a run and finds a young girl, 2-year-old Maya, sitting in his store with a note from her biological mother stating that she is leaving Maya at the store so that Maya can grow up around people who likes books.

A.J. brings Maya to the police station where Lambiase is on duty. He has to keep Maya for at least the weekend due to weather and the ferry schedule, so A.J. calls his sister-in-law Ismay for advice on what best to feed a toddler. Ismay shows up with a bag of groceries. Maya cries when she sees Ismay, but Ismay is not deterred from helping A.J.

As A.J. takes care of Maya, he realizes he is going long stretches without thinking about "Tamerlane" or Nic, the first time he's done that since the loss of either. Saturday afternoon, Marian Wallace is identified as Maya's mother when her body washes up on shore. Marian, a 22-year-old black woman, has committed suicide. Information about Marian surfaces, and A.J. learns that she was a championship swimmer, attended Harvard on scholarship, was in and out of foster care due to her parents' deaths. She also loved to read.

Lambiase begins his hobby of spending time at the bookstore and helping A.J. with Maya, which he doesn't mind because not only does he have several younger siblings, but he also has nobody to go home to since his recent divorce. He helps A.J. sort out whether or not to keep Maya, since A.J. begins to think that Maya doesn't belong in the foster system like her mother; A.J. feels a sense of responsibility toward Maya since Marian left her in his care. A.J.'s decision of whether or not to keep her is complicated with each passing experience: she calls him "Daddy" without any prompting; she makes him laugh; and she says "Love you" to him. Thus, when Jenny the social worker arrives to take Maya into foster care, A.J. decides to adopt her.

The Alice Island community supports A.J.'s decision, but the Alice Island Mothers, as A.J. calls them, are also overly attentive to A.J. in the weeks following the adoption. They make sure he has what he needs, makes sure he knows what he's doing, they



give him small gifts such as blankets, toys, and clothes, and they offer plenty of parenting advice. The group eventually forms a Book Club, and one of the members asks A.J. to diversify his collection of books for them to read.

Lambiasi convinces A.J. to host a christening party for Maya, officially welcoming her to the Alice Island community. A.J. hesitates, since he doesn't like parties or a lot of social interaction, but in the end he agrees. At the party, which resembles a book party, A.J. feels a sense of happiness when he sees Maya in her pink party dress. He doesn't regret either decision, having the party or adopting Maya. Unfortunately, his night ends with a visit to the hospital to see Ismay, who has had another miscarriage. Daniel leaves for Hollywood so Lambiasi watches Maya while A.J. goes to the hospital. Ismay insists she deserves the miscarriage, and she also chooses to stay in the hospital overnight so she doesn't have to be at her house alone.

## Analysis

Chapter 3 is an extremely important chapter as it contains the event that sets in motion A.J.'s transformation, mainly the softening of his heart. There are also several small clues of what's to come, which the reader can see with close reading. The chapter introduction lets the reader know that A.J. is writing to Maya, so the reader finally knows to whom he writing his book notes to. It's important to note one of A.J.'s statements in the chapter introduction, that one responds differently to the same story depending on the time in one's life one comes across said story. His words describe the main event of the chapter and one of the most important events in the novel: when he adopts Maya. A.J. is recognizing the fact that at one point in his life, he may not have accepted a child being left in his care, and he certainly wouldn't have chosen to adopt her. However, he knows that his heart is changing and that that is okay. He sometimes acts like he wants to maintain a gruff demeanor, but his fairly quick acceptance of pivotal life changes, especially bringing a young girl into his life for which he will be solely responsible, indicates that A.J. is softer than even he gives himself credit for being.

Other clues as to what's to come are Ismay's and Maya's reactions to each other when Ismay arrives with groceries the night Maya is left at the bookstore. The reader does not know of their connection until Chapter 11, but the way Maya sobs, not just cries, when she sees Ismay, and the way Ismay runs her fingers through her hair and quickly moves on to a different topic are all small indications of the connection between them. The author's writing style reveals small bits of the narrative at a time but in such a discreet way that the reader would have a difficult time picking up on the clue. At the conclusion of the chapter, Ismay alludes to being a bad person. To the reader, at this point, she has done nothing bad but rather just has a potentially unfaithful husband. Yet Ismay insists she deserves the miscarriage because she is a bad person, again alluding to the connection she shares with Maya.

After "Tamerlane" is stolen, A.J. stops locking the door to Island Books. He believes there is nothing worth stealing now that his most prized book has gone missing. However, A.J.'s decision to stop locking the door goes deeper than that. It's a passive



way for A.J. to express that he is at a point where he's not sure his life has any meaning. The book he counted on selling for his retirement is missing, his wife has died, and there is no one and nothing else worth living for, in A.J.'s opinion. When A.J. stops locking the door, it's a symbol of his hopelessness and his sense of defeat. As a result of that hopelessness and defeat, he is giving up, willing to risk everything he's poured his time and money into over the last several years.

Lambiase is yet again present for one of A.J.'s most important life moments. This time, A.J. notes that fact and is seemingly appreciative of the pattern, especially since A.J. doesn't like change and he doesn't form relationships with other people very easily. Lambiase, too, enjoys the company and the excuse to care about other people, since he is another character who experiences loneliness but would rather not. A.J. takes well to Lambiase. Though a specific reason for that is not given, it is likely because Lambiase has remained calm during each of A.J.'s crucial life events. They also bond because Lambiase is not overly emotional or grandiose about anything, much like A.J. Given A.J.'s personality and the fact that he has been living by himself for about two years, it makes sense that he would prefer a friend who stays even-keeled and consistent in all situations, as opposed to one who given to large swings of emotions.

The Alice Island community is a backdrop to this novel, but their presence when A.J. adopts Maya is significant. Not only does the community continue to support Island Books, no matter how fledgling their sales may be, but the community is clearly concerned for A.J. and his ability to care for a young girl. Though it is a stereotype to assume that women in a small town gossip and want to know everything that's going on with everyone, they are important to the story since Island Books is Alice Island's only bookstore. A.J. depends on them and everyone else on the island to support his livelihood. Which they do, and for it they trade motherly advice, small gifts, and what A.J. knows is well-meaning concern but what sometimes comes across as being overly concerned, especially given that A.J. does not favor a lot of social interaction.

## Discussion Question 1

A.J. responds to Maya's presence is fairly calm considering it was a complete surprise. What are some of the factors that may have influenced this kind of reaction, especially given A.J.'s generally gruff demeanor?

## Discussion Question 2

A.J. doesn't believe in random acts; he sees everything as a "structured narrative." Does this perspective have anything to do with his decision to adopt Maya? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

Though A.J. doesn't always prefer company, what are some of the reasons he doesn't mind the mothers of Alice Island coming by and dispensing parenting advice once he adopts Maya?

## Vocabulary

waterlogged, methinks, cheeky, tome, ruminating, deigns, insomnia, Gollum, primer, appraising, ascend, insidious, sinister, curate, irony



# Part I, Chapter 4: What Feels Like the World

## Summary

Chapter 4 is the shortest chapter of the novel and is written still in the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator, but it's almost entirely from Maya's perspective as a toddler. The chapter intro continues to be A.J.'s notes about a book, this one from "What Feels Like the World" by Richard Bausch.

Maya loves the bookstore; it's her favorite place in the world. Every morning she wakes A.J. by calling him in increasing volume levels until he is awake. As a toddler, Maya scoots her butt down each stair, since her legs are too short to walk. She says 'Good morning!' to each element of the bookstore: the magazines, bookmarks, books, and then to the store as a whole. Maya measures the store by how many of her it is wide and long. She knows the customers and A.J.'s friends by the shoes they wear. Maya spends her days in the picture book aisle, first smelling the book she wants to read by stripping off the jacket and wrapping the book around her head. She looks at the pictures and tries to understand the story. Maya gets through about seven books with no interruptions, but there are always interruptions since A.J.'s customers and his friends like to talk to her.

Some of the things Maya wonders about are how one learns how to read, why grown-ups like books without pictures, if Daddy (A.J.) will ever die, and what is for lunch that day. Maya treats A.J. as a superhero, since he can touch the wallpaper without jumping, can lift heavy things over his head, uses big words, possesses a lot of knowledge (from Maya's perspective), and can do more than one thing at a time. She doesn't often think of her mother.

Maya enjoys her time with A.J., even the walks they take when she is somewhat squeezed into her stroller. He tells her about "Tamerlane" and how he used to own the book, and why it's her middle name. She tries to please him by not complaining about being squeezed into the stroller, and she also chooses a different book for her bedtime story. At the end of the chapter, Maya reads her first word from "Caps for Sale": Red.

## Analysis

The chapter intro indicates A.J.'s deep affection for his adopted daughter. He calls her "my girl," and does not seem to regret the fact that during her toddlerhood, he mostly only had time for short stories. This book note is more of a book note than many other chapter intros where A.J. tells Maya what in his own life makes him think of that specific novel. The title is fitting for the chapter, which is entirely from Maya's perspective. "What





"Feels Like the World" is a metaphor for how Maya feels about A.J. and the bookstore, being so young and thinking the bookstore to be the best place in the world.

Most of the chapters in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" are written from an omniscient narrator who tells the thoughts and perspectives of each character that is present in the chapter. This chapter, however, while still from an omniscient narrator but it is entirely from Maya's point of view. For the reader, knowing what she's thinking is important to understanding how the story continues to flow and how she and A.J. have formed their strong bond. It's appropriate that this is the shortest chapter, since Maya is only three years old at this point in the story, therefore having not nearly as many thoughts and perspectives as the other characters, who are all grown-ups.

Another one of Maya's perspectives to pay attention to is the fact that all of A.J.'s friends and customers are shoes to her at this point, not people. She knows who people are by their shoes, and identifies them as such. Even though she is not A.J.'s daughter biologically, Maya seems to have a similar approach to the people who are regularly in her life: emotional distance. Again, she cannot intellectualize this, but the people who visit the shop all the time and with whom she would be quite familiar at this point, Daniel, Ismay, Lambiase, and Molly Klock, are seen at a distance. She knows A.J.'s shoes, too, but she also considers him a superhero (another indication of her implicit trust in him). The others are only shoes, an indication that she does not immediately take to people, much like A.J.

The questions Maya asks herself are important to note. Her thoughts range from the simple (what's for lunch that day) to the heavy (will Daddy ever die). Maya is quite cerebral for a 3-year-old, and she knows she was left by her mother to be raised by other people. Thus, Maya has experienced a significant loss in her short life. Though she is still a toddler and developmentally cannot internalize or cognitively process what she has experienced, she knows that her mom is dead and never coming back and that she will be staying with A.J. until she grows up. And it may seem counter-intuitive, but Maya is happy to have A.J. as her father. Since she loves the bookstore so much (and states that she is glad to have not been left in a sandwich shop), Maya's sense of abandonment seems to be replaced by a sense of gratefulness that of all places she could have been left, it was a bookstore. She also expresses a gratitude that A.J. is the one with whom she was left. Since the moment he found her, Maya has taken to him as her father. She implicitly trusts him, and it's that implicit trust that keeps at bay any sadness or frustration or anger a child in her place may typically feel.

## Discussion Question 1

Aside from loving books, why might Maya love the store as much as she does?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might A.J. have given Maya the middle name of Tamerlane?





## Discussion Question 3

Why might Maya think that if she lets go of A.J.'s hand in the sandwich shop, she'll get left there? Explain your answer.

## Vocabulary

damask, waiscoting, vantage, tropes, nagging, gesticulates, mugs



# Part I, Chapter 5: A Good Man Is Hard to Find

## Summary

The chapter introduction reveals that this book, written by Flannery O'Connor, is Amelia's favorite, though A.J. calls her Amy in this note. He tells Maya that people generally lie about big things, such as politics, God, and love, but if A.J. says if you ask a person, "What is your favorite book?", you can find out everything you need to know about that person.

Maya gets the chicken pox just before she starts Kindergarten. A.J. is upset with the mother who told him that the chicken pox vaccine was optional; he now wishes he had just gotten it. On the third day of Maya being sick, A.J. picks up "The Late Bloomer" because it is closest to him. He is desperate to read anything he can get his hands on just to pass the time. He remembers the title as one that Amelia Loman had left about four years ago. Originally, the book was one he did not want to read or sell. On this night, the book has struck a nerve with him and Maya wakes up to A.J. crying for the power of the story.

A.J. calls Amelia to tell her that he read "The Late Bloomer." They share an easy conversation about the book, and A.J. asks Amelia out to a dinner date the next time she comes to town with a Knightley Press book list. Amelia makes it a lunch date, since she'll have to catch the ferry back to Hyannis.

A.J. takes Amelia to Pequod's, a Moby Dick-themed restaurant of which A.J. can't stand the decor. However, it is the second-nicest place in town and A.J. does not want to make Amelia uncomfortable by making her think it's a fancy date. The two share an easy conversation about seafood, the lameness of the restaurant decor, and books. A.J. gives a shortened version of Nic's death; Amelia reveals that she is engaged to be married to a man in the military. A.J. pays the bill and tells her she can pay the next time. As they part, Amelia tells A.J. that her friends call her Amy.

A.J. begins working on coming up with reasons to communicate with Amelia. He reads every book on the latest Knightly Press book list and sends Amelia an e-mail after each one, giving her his thoughts. He orders more than usual from her, as well. When he finishes the last title, he sends a text message to Amelia that is more professional than usual. She responds that A.J. should watch "True Blood" while he's waiting for the next book list. He is trying to keep his distance because he thinks his feelings for Amelia are just a silly crush, so he tells her there's no chance he'll watch that show and he'll see her in March.



Lambiase encourages A.J. to start dating. He tries but doesn't really care for either of the two women he tries to date, though he does sleep with one of them. He decides he will remain alone, raising his daughter, running his store, and reading his books.

Ismay wants to sign Amelia up for dance classes with Madame Olenska. A.J. hesitates because of the gender stereotype involved in little girls taking dance lessons but ultimately concedes, especially since Ismay is paying for it. A.J. spends much of his winter at the dance studio where he watches Maya and learns a lot about Madame Olenska. After one of their recitals, A.J. thinks about his grief from Nic's death and the fact that he's been alone for six years. He knows that he doesn't want just anyone to fill the void of having a companion, but that he wants Amelia. A.J. bounces a couple of deep ideas off of Maya, such as the benefit of having loved and lost than never have loved at all. The conversation turns to Maya wondering if A.J. used to be a pirate since he used to have an earring in one of his ears.

The winter is a brutal one that closes a lot of roads and the ferry service, forcing the Alice Island community to be in close quarters. Daniel Parish can't travel as much as he would like to, so he spends most of his time with A.J. and Maya, avoiding Ismay. Maya finds out that Daniel is a writer and is enthralled with the idea. A.J. spends his time running his bookstore but also watching "True Blood," though he doesn't tell Amelia until she asks him. She is coming to town in just about a week and offers to treat at Pequod's. However, the day before she arrives A.J. receives a call from the man he discovers is Amelia's ex-fiance that she has injured herself and cannot make the trip to Alice Island. Therefore, A.J. and Amelia have their quarterly book meeting over Skype. A.J. is thrilled to have a chance to see her, though he tames his emotions, especially during the video call.

A.J. finds a reason to visit Rhode Island, where Amelia lives. He finds a topiary garden and uses Maya's interest in topiaries as a pretense for visiting Rhode Island. Lambiase accompanies him and Maya, but when they arrive the three discover that the garden is closed for the season. A.J. goes to see Amelia at her house, and the two end up having an intimate encounter. He leaves a note for her next to one of her books that lets her know he doesn't want to wait until the next Knightley Press book list comes out to see her again.

## Analysis

The chapter title lets the reader know that Chapter 5 will be about relationships. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" hints at the fact that Amelia and her fiance break up and that because she has more in common with A.J. with more of an affinity toward him. Their attraction to each other, however, may be difficult for the reader to see since neither are the type to overly express their emotions. They feel that they are far too intellectual for that. Each obviously knows they care for the other, as the reader can see by the way they text message with one another about topics other than books, tease each other and banter digitally and in person, and the way they think about each other when they're not with one another. It was a matter of timing, though, for the two of them to get



together. A.J. takes a huge risk in going to visit Amelia by way of the topiary gardens in Rhode Island. Maya indicates that she knows A.J. cares for Amelia, but she doesn't make a big deal of it; she acts like it's natural and common knowledge. And A.J., even though he is clearly nervous given that he's been alone for six years and hasn't significantly cared about anyone since Nic died, treats his feelings for Amelia the same way: that it's a natural progression of things and that being together is the natural thing to happen.

Amelia has been missing from the novel for the previous three chapters, so it would seem that A.J.'s feelings have popped up out of nowhere. However, this chapter reveals that Amelia has been visiting Island Books faithfully each season to bring A.J. her company's latest book list. When Maya is sick and he picks up "The Late Bloomer", A.J. recalls how Amelia has never once brought up how nasty he was to her at their first meeting. That fact seems to open up something in his heart that allows him to appreciate her and her presence in his and Maya's life. A.J. has such a hard time being vulnerable with others, but since books are the most personal thing to him and he appreciates routine more than almost anything else, it is likely that Amelia's consistency and same passion for books has fueled his feelings for her. So, even though their relationship may begin somewhat quickly, it has really been developing for the previous four years.

When A.J. and Amelia have dinner together at Pequod's, A.J. insists on paying for the meal. Though at one time he thought he would never date again because he thought he could never care for another woman like he cared for Nic, Amelia has grown on him and he finds himself wanting to communicate with her more and more. His gesture of paying for dinner is a way for him to say--mainly to himself--that he's ready to move forward in other romantic pursuits. In response, when Amelia tells A.J. after their dinner at Pequod's that her friends call her Amy, she is letting A.J. know that she would like to be more than just his professional acquaintance. Even if she does not articulate it to herself, Amelia is letting A.J. know that she is on the same track as him in terms of her feelings for him, their friendship, and the distant hope of a future relationship.

A.J.'s softened heart can also be seen when he is caring for Maya. He stays by her side at almost all times and holds her for long stretches of time on his chest while she's healing from the chicken pox. It is here that he reads "The Late Bloomer", a memoir that impacts him so deeply that Maya wakes up to him crying. While it would be more likely for A.J. to express such a reaction to a book than a person, the scene includes Maya lying on his chest; it is a big difference from his character at the beginning of the novel when he would often fall asleep drunk.

A small detail that seems to be about A.J. and Maya but is really about Ismay and Maya is the fact that Ismay pays for dance class for Maya. The reader may have already sensed a strange connection between the two, but since the reader does not find out the true connection between Ismay and Maya for a few more chapters, the fact that Ismay is paying for dance class just seems like a kindly action on behalf of Maya's aunt. The reader will soon find out that Ismay is paying for dance classes more out of guilt than out of wanting to help A.J. or Maya.



Similarly, the reader does not know Daniel's connection to Maya for a few more chapters, so his taking to Maya and her taking to him seems like a natural, uncle-to-niece relationship. The author gives a clue, though, as to Daniel's attitude when the narrator states that he's ignoring his wife and spending his time with A.J. and Maya. Daniel knows his wife is hurting emotionally from her latest miscarriage, but he seems unwilling to change anything about himself or his lifestyle in order to make that better.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some indications from their digital and in-person conversations that Amelia and A.J. feel the same way about one another?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might A.J. have agreed to get set up with two different women, especially considering the first one didn't work out?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Maya knowing that A.J. has special feelings for Amelia before A.J. has admitted them to even himself?

## Vocabulary

triannually, penance, monotone, consolation, harpoons, mirth, fauxhawk, hipster, hyperbolic, blood diamond, horrendous, dormancy, affianced, rosary, cerebral, condescending, inhospitable, provocative, galoshes, topiary, eclectic, sensibility



# Part I, Chapter 6: The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

## Summary

The chapter title is a book written by Mark Twain and reminds A.J. of the time when Leon Friedman, the author of "The Late Bloomer," came to town, an event covered in this chapter. In his notes, he tells Maya to ask Amy about it someday. He also lets Maya know that at this point in his life, he cannot remember ever being happier as he watches her and Amy read on Amy's old purple couch.

The beginning of the chapter contains several conversations in a row about Amelia and A.J.'s long-distance relationship and how it would be great if Amelia could move to Alice Island, but how difficult that would be on her given her job and travel schedule. A.J. looks for a reason to have Amelia schedule an additional visit, and he thinks to invite Leon Friedman for an author's visit at Island Books. Since Amelia is part of Friedman's publishing house, she would likely have to be at the event. A.J. purchases an engagement ring but tells Maya he won't propose to her at the book event because he doesn't want her to feel pressured to say "yes."

Leon Friedman visits, but is very drunk the entire time. He is also slightly inappropriate with Amelia and her mother. The visit does not go as Amelia or A.J. had planned. At the end of the event, A.J. accompanies Ismay as she brings Friedman to the ferry then to the airport. While Amelia is cleaning up she meets a woman named Leonora Ferris. Maya points out that Leonora is similar to Leon, which prompts Amelia to realize that she is the actual author of "The Late Bloomer" and that the book is a novel not a memoir. She is angry, but decides not to share the information with A.J.

Before Amelia goes back to the hotel that night to stay with her mother, who had accompanied Amelia to Alice Island for the author's visit, A.J. proposes. His proposal is not romantic, but Amelia agrees to marry him anyway. The next fall, A.J. and Amelia marry. Amelia gives Maya a box of book nameplates as a gift for the wedding. Maya gives Amelia a bottle of orange nail polish called "A Good Man-darin is Hard to Find." A.J. wanted to invite Leon Friedman, but Amelia rejects the idea, though they do have one of Amelia's college friends read a passage from "The Late Bloomer." The passage is about choosing to not be alone.

## Analysis

It is unclear when A.J. is writing the book notes for Maya that appear as each chapter introduction. However, since Maya is reading a Toni Morrison novel, she is likely approaching her teenage years or in her teenage years. The most significant phrase of the Chapter 6 introductory notes is "...ask Amy to tell you about it someday." It is



another one of the author's hints that A.J. will not be around for all of Maya's life. These book notes that A.J. is leaving for Maya read like they are a man's last words for his children, especially when A.J. includes phrases such as that, as well as his reflection on the fact that he's never been happier than as when he watches his daughter and his wife read. The books he chooses to leave notes about span two centuries, letting Maya know that life lessons can be found in books no matter their age. This may be a parallel to the fact that A.J. and Amelia both feel as though they've settled into themselves and their lives later in life than others, given that they are in their late 30s (Amelia) and early 40s (A.J.) when they come together.

A.J. and Amelia's relationship is well-developed at this point. Just as they seemed to view their feelings for one another as a natural progression, they also seemed to view their marriage to one another the same way. Though they share many conversations about the logistics of such a change--mostly for Amelia--it didn't stop A.J. from buying a ring or Amelia from accepting his proposal. The conversations about the logistics of Amelia moving there seemed required thinking for two people who tend to live more intellectually than emotionally. However, since that is how the two of them connected in the first place and continue to connect as they further their relationship, it makes sense that processing through the logistics would be a precursor to a proposal.

A.J.'s proposal is unusual, as he leads with all the reasons she should say no: he's stuck on the island, is a single father, her mother hates him, and he can't host a decent author event. He ends the proposal with books, though, promising Amelia books, conversation, and all his heart. Those three things are the most intimate things A.J. can think to offer a partner with whom he wants to spend the rest of his life.

Their ceremony is short and includes a passage from "The Late Bloomer," a surprising concession by Amelia considering her anger at the author for tricking the audience to make them think it was a memoir and not a novel. However, her determination to not let A.J. know the truth about Leon Friedman/Leonora Ferris may have led to her agreeing. Amelia also may have agreed simply because despite the author's true identity, the words in the book rang true for her, letting the reader know that Amelia, above all, is a lover of stories, just like A.J.

## Discussion Question 1

What's the first indication that Leon Friedman is not the true author of "The Late Bloomer"? Explain your answer.

## Discussion Question 2

Why might Amelia choose to keep Leon Friedman's true identity from A.J. ?



## Discussion Question 3

How is A.J.'s proposal fitting to his personality, as well as to his and Amelia's relationship?

## Vocabulary

irresolvable, substandard, narrative, capacious, languorously, paraphernalia, lecherous, detritus, fedora, maxidress, infallible





# Part I, Chapter 7: The Girls in Their Summer Dresses

## Summary

The book used for the Chapter 7 intro is "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses," written by Irwin Shaw. A.J. uses it to give Maya a couple thoughts on plot twists, as well as to tell her that when she picks someone to marry, she needs to make sure she picks someone who thinks she's the only one in the room.

Daniel and Ismay are the two main characters in this chapter. It takes place as they are getting ready to go to A.J.'s wedding. Daniel shows up to the house late and although Ismay contemplates leaving without him, she doesn't. He smells like alcohol when he arrives.

During the ceremony, Ismay thinks about Amelia's Renaissance Faire-style dress and the rest of Amelia's look for the day. Immediately after, Ismay reflects on how negative she has become over the years and how unhappy she currently is. She leaves the reception and goes for a walk down on the shore. Walking along the coastline Ismay contemplates swimming out past the rocks in order to end her life, just like Marian Wallace did. Lambiase happens to see her and makes light conversation, then encourages her to come back inside to the wedding.

Daniel flirts with the maid of honor at the reception, prompting Ismay to leave the party early. Daniel follows her to the car, and they head home. In the car Ismay thinks again about ending her life, this time by driving the car off the road. However, she realizes she doesn't want to be dead, she just wants Daniel to be gone. Her realization gives her courage to tell Daniel she doesn't love him anymore, she knows he slept with Marian Wallace, and she knows Maya is his biological daughter. Ismay stops the car on the side of a narrow road. The car is hit twice, and amidst their arguing about Marian, Maya, and their marriage, the car is hit hard enough that Daniel doesn't survive the crash. He is thinking about the idea of plot twists when the crash does happen, as well as the fact that before this accident, he really didn't know what a car accident sounded like even though he had written about them several times in his novels. It is unclear whether or not Ismay survives the crash.

## Analysis

Chapter 7 is the last chapter in Part I of "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry". Ismay and Daniel are the only two characters whose thoughts and actions are represented in this chapter. It seems that this wouldn't flow with the story, but since each chapter goes along with notes on a different book, at times the novel reads like a collection of short stories strung together to show one larger narrative. This chapter is one of those times.



Thus far, Ismay and Daniel haven't been incredibly prominent characters in the novel, but they have been important and consistent in their personalities and interactions. Ismay is one of the characters who, like A.J., finds courage where she thinks she has none and makes a choice she never thought she'd make: standing up to her husband and telling him she doesn't love him anymore.

The book notes A.J. leaves for Maya are about plot twists and marriage, both of which are present in Chapter 7. The plot twist of Maya being Daniel's biological daughter is something the author has been hinting at since Maya was dropped off in the store. However, they have been short statements and hints camouflaged in the story, thus indistinguishable as a foreshadow of any kind. When Ismay reveals this knowledge to the reader, she has clearly known for a long time. It is likely that she has reached a breaking point with Daniel's deception, even though Maya is the only lie that has been covered up; every other one of Daniel's indiscretions has been public knowledge since he makes no attempt to hide his adulterous behavior. The other plot twist of Daniel dying is one that closes out the entire first part of the novel, indicating that the second part of the novel is like the second act of a play: it will be a continuation of the first act but have its own distinctive markings as a Part II.

Marriage is the other big part of this chapter. It appears first in Ismay's description of Amelia and A.J.'s wedding. Though Ismay is thinking of the wedding and its elements negatively, the reader can create their own image from how Ismay describes the decor and Amelia's dress and accessories. Two, the concept of marriage is present in the reader's perception of Ismay and Daniel's relationship. They are married, but they are less of a husband-and-wife team than two people who are legally bound as spouses. They do not act like they like each other. Ismay is openly displeased with Daniel, though more with her facial expressions and demeanor than with her words. Daniel compliments Ismay, but they are always shallow compliments and he regularly avoids her. A.J. knows of their loveless relationship, and so in his book notes to Maya wants to let Maya know the kind of guy she should find if and when she decides to marry.

Daniel's death at the end of the chapter is significant, not just because it closes out Part 1 of the novel, but because his death symbolizes the potential end of Ismay's misery. Daniel is a character that is a catalyst for the biggest plot point of the novel--Maya's surprise appearance and A.J.'s subsequent adoption of her--but now he is dead. His work seems to be done: he has changed everyone's life, not always for the better, and is now gone, which coincidentally changes Ismay's life for the better. An important note about Daniel's death is that his last thoughts are not of himself and his writing rather than other people, putting a final stamp on what his focus has been: himself and his ego.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Ismay seem to think of her own negativity?



## Discussion Question 2

Why might Daniel continue to flirt openly with other women, even when Ismay is around? Explain your answer.

## Discussion Question 3

How does Ismay deflect Daniel's repeated denial of having known Marian Wallace?

## Vocabulary

sundry, perimenopause, overestimate, mediocre, gingham, pantomime



# Part II, Chapter 8: A Conversation with My Father

## Summary

The chapter intro is A.J.'s shortest note to Maya. "A Conversation with My Father" is written by Grace Paley, and A.J. writes to Maya that the book is about a "dying father arguing with his daughter about the 'best' way to tell a story."

The chapter is written mostly from Maya's perspective as she works on writing a short story for her creative writing class. The assignment is to write a piece about someone the writer wishes he or she knew better. Maya isn't sure about whom she should write. She begins writing about Amelia's cat, Puddleglum, but after two drafts gives up that idea. Amelia and A.J. both try to help, but Maya is upset about not being able to write and therefore is annoyed at their suggestions. Part of Maya's irritation comes from A.J. teasing her that her first literary crush was Daniel Parish, which Maya insists isn't true. A.J. also leaves a note for Maya suggesting eight different books that may help her with writing her story.

Maya ultimately writes the story and is excited to hand it in, though all the reader knows is that it is called "A Trip to the Beach." Her creative writing teacher reads the story aloud, garnering opinions from Maya's classmates. She receives mixed reviews, but Mr. Balboni states that it's one of the best in the class and that he'll be entering it in the county's short story contest. One of Maya's classmates, John Furness, tries to have Maya ride with him and his family to the awards ceremony for the short story contest, but Maya holds her ground that her dad will want to go together. John is the author of the other story from their creative writing class that is being entered in the county contest.

At the contest, Maya avoids introducing A.J. to her creative writing teacher because of how A.J. has embarrassed her in front of teachers in the past. She also notes that she chose to wear jeans, so as not to appear to care too deeply about the contest, but that Amelia will likely be upset that Maya didn't wear the dress Amelia chose for her. Only the top three entries are read aloud. A.J. is bored of John Furness' story, which Maya can tell by the distant look in his eyes. The next entry, a story called "The Journey" from a girl from a different school, peaks A.J.'s interest a little more, but only until it goes on too long. The end of the chapter is a cliff-hanger as to whether or not it is Maya's story to be chosen as the last of the three stories being read aloud at the ceremony. In the omniscient narrator's voice, the reader gains insight into Maya's thought process as she thinks through the possible outcomes of the contest: If John wins, she'll try not to hate him; if she wins, she'll maybe donate the gift certificate. At the conclusion of the chapter, the third story is announced and as it is, Maya grabs A.J.'s hand.



## Analysis

Chapter 8 begins Part II. The intro is A.J.'s shortest book note, yet it gives the largest foreshadow of any other chapter intro, as it states that the book--"A Conversation with My Father"--is about a dying father, an experience Maya will have within the next couple years. These notes were likely written near A.J.'s death, and that may be the reason for the short book note. To think about leaving his daughter would be a difficult thing to think about, especially for someone who tends to not be overly emotional.

There is no mention of Daniel's death, but instead the story has fast-forwarded an unstated number of years. But Maya is now in high school. The reader has recently found out that Daniel is Maya's biological father, and this chapter reveals that Maya still has no clue who her father is, and her knowledge of her mother is limited. She seems to have grown up as her biological mother wanted, though, because her actions show that she cares very much about her writing, and that she still loves the bookstore even if she doesn't love living above it anymore due to its small square footage.

Leading up to the short story contest, it is clear that Maya is happy to have her story chosen for the contest. She takes her classmates' criticisms in stride, which is an important skill if she wants to be a professional writer. The reader doesn't find out in this chapter what Maya has written about, but since Mr. Balboni believes it to be good enough for the short story contest, combined with the fact that she is supposed to write about someone she wishes she knew better and John Furness mentions how sad it is, the reader can deduce that it is likely about her mother. Maya, like A.J., doesn't keep a lot of people in her life. She is more to herself and prefers a book over people. Therefore, aside from possibly some authors or book characters, the only person Maya would likely want to know better is her mother.

The evolution of Maya's relationship with both Amelia and A.J. can be seen in how they interact at the awards ceremony for the short story contest. Maya doesn't wear the dress Amelia had chosen for her, knowing Amelia would be disappointed but caring more that she be comfortable and not appear to care too much for the contest, just in case she doesn't win. Maya correctly predicts that Amelia will say something about the dress when she arrives, but the interaction is brief and seems to have no lasting impact on their relationship. Before the contest, Amelia is shown to be respectful of Maya's time and space, as well as supportive of Maya's writing endeavors, all of which Maya seems to appreciate. In regards to Maya and A.J., the reader can see that they have a typical father-daughter relationship: A.J. walks into her room without knocking and Maya has an attitude about it; A.J. teases Maya about her first literary crush, and Maya blushes; Maya prefers to go to the ceremony with A.J., and once there, holds his hand when the emcee announces the third story. The two share a close parent-child relationship, as they always have. The implicit trust Maya has always had in A.J. seems to have stayed intact throughout the years.

Another important note about Chapter 8 is the fact that Maya is gently pursued by her male classmate, John Furness. It is subtle, but when John tries to get Maya to drive with



him and his family to the awards ceremony, he is clearly expressing an interest in her. Maya, however, seems oblivious to his goal of asking her out on a date, which speaks to her life lived in a bookstore. She continues to prefer books over people to such an extent that she does not recognize when other people are actively trying to spend time with her.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Even though Maya is adopted, she shows learned traits from A.J. What are some of those traits, and how does Maya show them?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is it easier for Maya to write about inanimate objects as opposed to about people?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What might the author be suggesting with the title of Maya's short story?

## **Vocabulary**

concede, anthropomorphizing, inanimate, ferocity, exponentially, ominous, evocative, contractions, ambiguity, discrepancies, pompadour



# Part II, Chapter 9: A Perfect Day for Bananafish

## Summary

The chapter intro consists of the notes A.J. has written about "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," a short story written by J.D. Salinger. However, his notes are more about how Maya should have won the short story contest than they are about Salinger's novel.

Most of the chapter is Maya's short story, "A Trip to the Beach." It is Maya's version of what she knows of her mother. In Maya's version, a young, single mom named Mary has a two-year-old daughter but has no support system. She has a babysitter, but paying the babysitter takes almost all of the money out of Mary's checking account. Mary is in school, but has fallen behind in her classes and no longer receives the high grades she used to. She has also stopped swimming on the swim team.

Mary goes to visit her foster mom, who lives in a run-down home in a run-down part of town. Mary is described as a skinny black woman in comparison to her obese white mother. Mary's mother has a negative attitude toward Mary and the baby, and she tells Mary that Mary cannot stay with her at the home, despite Mary's desperate plea to do so.

Mary returns to her dorm room, seemingly determined to make the situation better for at least her child. She packs a bag for the baby, buys a ferry ticket to head over to Alice Island, and then visits a bookstore once she arrives on the island. She asks the owner for a certain book. When the owner retrieves the book, Mary leaves the baby in the bookstore and heads to the beach. She swims out past the lighthouse and does not return.

John Furness wins the short story contest. She congratulates him, and he congratulates her for placing. He also tries to ask her out on a date again but, intentionally or not, Maya continues denying him. On their way home from the short story contest, A.J. speaks a monologue about why contests like this one aren't fair and why Maya should have won. When they arrive home, A.J. shakes Maya's hand, which causes Maya to think, "The day my father shook my hand, I knew I was a writer."

A.J. and Amelia buy a house about 10 minutes away from the store. It is a fixer-upper, and Amelia immediately gets to work on her projects. Maya calls the house a Bag House, because she says it looks as though a hobbit might live there. Maya's reference to a hobbit makes A.J. proud that he has raised a daughter who thinks in literary terms just as he does.



## Analysis

The chapter intro is different than most of the others because it is more about A.J.'s life philosophy and writing tips instead of being about the Salinger book he's supposedly writing the note about. It's still significant because the book is obviously important enough to A.J. for him to leave it in this collection of book notes for Maya, but he spends more time defending her, her story, and her future as a writer. His words continue to affirm the relationship he and Maya have built up over the previous twelve years that Maya's been in his care. The reader can see why Maya trusts him so automatically, and it's because his faith in her comes just as naturally as her trust in him. Therefore, even though the chapter tells a sad version of Marian Wallace and how Maya was orphaned, the reader can assume that Maya is more content with A.J. as her father than she might have been with Marian as her mother.

The chapter intro also foreshadows the fact that Maya doesn't win, since A.J. assures her that winning a contest does something for sales but is rarely a mark of a quality story. His language is quite consoling, so the reader can assume before reading the chapter that "A Trip to the Beach" didn't win the contest.

Maya's short story is her version of how she was orphaned at Island Books. Not only does the story match what the reader has learned so far about Marian Wallace, but the names are similar, too. For example, Marian has been changed to Mary. The story is likely embellished some, because no one in Maya's circle can know what Marian experienced before dropping off Maya at Island Books. What the reader can assume, however, is that something like Maya's short story likely did happen to Marian. The hopelessness is present from the beginning of Maya's story, and that is likely the way she intended for it to be. As Maya is growing up she doesn't dwell on the fact that she has no real knowledge of her mother. She does, however, seem to think more about her, given that she's written an entire short story about her. Back in chapter 4, the chapter written from Maya's perspective, Maya had recognized that she would think of her mom more when she was older, which has now come to fruition.

Maya has been enthralled with books since she was a toddler, so the fact that she wants to be a writer, or at least write in her spare time as a hobby, makes sense. She seems to genuinely care about the craft and want to do as best as she can. Maya also seems to thrive on A.J.'s approval, though she expresses this in a subtle way. For example, when A.J. gives her a list of books that may help her with her short story, she goes right to the store to investigate the list. After the contest, she is sure A.J. is going to be disappointed in her that she didn't win. Yet, when A.J. gives his monologue about how contests like these are never fair, and then he shakes her hand after telling her that her story should have won, she feels like a true writer. A.J.'s opinion means a great deal to Maya, even when she exhibits moody, typical teenage behavior. As with the beginning of the chapter, the interaction between A.J. and Maya speaks to the strong relationship the two have built since the moment Maya was dropped off approximately 12 years prior.





## **Discussion Question 1**

What kind of language does A.J. use to show his pride in Maya?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the importance of John and Maya's interaction on page 195?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does A.J. choose to shake Maya's hand instead of giving her a hug after they arrive home from the contest?

## **Vocabulary**

morbidly, obese, trilogy, hobbit, hardships, choppy, colleague



## Part II, Chapter 10: The Tell-Tale Heart

### Summary

The chapter begins with an intro called "The Tell-Tale Heart," a piece written by E.A. (Edgar Allan) Poe. Similar to the Chapter 9 intro, A.J.'s Chapter 10 notes are more about his life than on the book. He shares that Nic died in a car accident, as well as some details about their time together in graduate school. A.J. also shares the conversation between him and Nic that led to them owning Island Books.

The chapter opens with the Chief's Choice Book Club meeting in Island Books. The club is led by Chief Lambiase, who has become quite a reader. His colleagues--two deputies, a dispatch worker, and a homicide cop--join him in the club. They discuss the latest crime novel that they've all read and pick apart the inaccuracies present in the police work.

After one of the Chief's Choice Book Club meetings, Lambiase decides that enough time has passed since Daniel Parish's death to ask Ismay out on a date. He asks A.J. if A.J. could check with Ismay to see if she'd be willing to go on a date with him. Though Ismay hesitates at first, she ultimately says "yes" and the two share a successful date: they enjoy each others' company, discuss books, and Ismay invites Lambiase to bed at the end of the evening.

In the morning, while Ismay is making them breakfast, Lambiase snoops around her room, bathroom, and closet. In her closet he finds a young girl's backpack with Maya's name on the outside and "Tamerlane" inside of it. The cover has been colored on. Lambiase is unsure of what to do, since he really likes Ismay but also is really wondering how and why "Tamerlane" is in Ismay's possession. He decides to say nothing, since Maya and A.J. are settled, the matter is more than 10 years old, and he wants to continue seeing Ismay. Lambiase does attempt to coax it out of her. Ismay, however, just continues making pancakes, and Lambiase doesn't reveal what he knows.

### Analysis

Though the chapter intro features A.J. and Nic, the rest of the chapter features mostly Lambiase and Ismay. The theme in A.J.'s notes, though, is what other options aside from a PhD a person has in order to live a literary life. This idea relates to Lambiase in regards to the fact that he once considered himself a non-reader. But once he started spending time with A.J. and Maya, he found that he enjoyed being around people who read and the way they made him want to read. The book club is also a set-up for the reader to see that Lambiase is still very much a part of A.J.'s life and Island Books. The intro also details the beginning of A.J. becoming part of the Alice Island community, since it was Nic's hometown and not his. A.J. is more of an introvert who seems to prefer to interact with as few people as necessary, but starting this bookstore was the



beginning of A.J.'s community, one he would need with the twist of events that occurred throughout his lifetime.

Ismay has not been featured since Part I when Daniel died. It is clear to the reader that she has moved on emotionally and that like the other characters in this novel is willing to try caring for someone else in order to rid herself of the loneliness that comes with being by herself. Though the conversation toward the beginning of their date is somewhat halted and both are nervous, Ismay and Lambiase eventually fall into an easy flow, letting the reader know that the author wants all characters to feel a sense of companionship with another person.

Friendship and Learning to Love Other People are two themes present in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry". Ismay and Lambiase exhibit both themes. Lambiase has befriended Ismay for many years even though he's been romantically interested. He waited what he felt was a respectable amount of time and then moved forward in pursuing her. Ismay probably didn't count Lambiase as a friend, but more of an acquaintance, especially since she tends to keep her distance from intimate relationships. However, when she is presented with the opportunity to care deeply for someone, she only hesitates for a short moment and then agrees to the date with Lambiase. A.J. was the same way with Maya; he took to her immediately and chose to adopt her within just a couple days of having her.

When Lambiase finds Maya's backpack and "Tamerlane" the next plot twist is introduced. The reader could have seen Lambiase and Ismay's relationship coming, since Lambiase expressed interest in Ismay at A.J.'s wedding. However, the fact that Ismay has "Tamerlane" and Maya's backpack is a curious addition to the plot. The reader knows that Maya has never been overly affectionate with Ismay, and Ismay with Maya. There is no hint as to why she would have A.J.'s rare book that ultimately led to his adoption of Maya, since he had left the store open due to "Tamerlane"'s disappearance, allowing Marian Wallace to drop off Maya without any kind of forced entry. Ismay may have had a clue that Lambiase saw what he saw, since she lightly questions him on being upstairs for so long while she's making breakfast, but neither she nor Lambiase take the conversation much further.

## Discussion Question 1

Why might A.J. be so surprised that Lambiase is romantically interested in Ismay?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some of the ways the reader can tell that Lambiase has grown into a voracious reader?



## Discussion Question 3

Despite her change of seeming happier than she was at the beginning of the novel, in what ways has Ismay stayed the same throughout the story?

## Vocabulary

quiche, shoddy, orchids, femininity, precocious, ambiguity, inquiry, hors d'oeuvres, upstanding, cashmere



## Part II, Chapter 11: Ironhead

### Summary

The chapter introduction gives a brief note that "Ironhead" is about "parents with heads made from pumpkins have a baby with a head made from iron." A.J. states he has been thinking a lot about this premise, as well as the plot-line of "Bullet in the Brain" by Tobias Wolff, though he does not give any notes about that book.

Chapter 11 starts at Christmas. A.J.'s mother, Paula, comes to visit, but it is more stressful than enjoyable for A.J. She gifts an e-reader to A.J., Maya, and Amelia. Amelia and Maya are appreciative; A.J. is angry that she would give him a gift that he sees as being a detriment to his business of owning a bookstore. The four share a tense conversation led by A.J. about how things are changing much to A.J.'s chagrin. He upsets his mother, despite Amelia trying to calm him down. Maya is appreciative and lets her grandmother know that she looks forward to trying it out until she goes to bed.

That same night, A.J. has an absence seizure that lasts longer than most, about 90 seconds. Amelia convinces him to see a doctor after the New Year. When A.J.'s routine is back to normal--Amelia back to work, Maya back to school, him running Island Books--A.J. blacks out on one of his morning runs to the bookstore. Dr. Rosen gives him a full check-up and finds nothing abnormal except for there is something strange about his eyes. A.J. is diagnosed with Glioblastoma multiforme, a type of cancer that is so rare it's only been heard of on two occasions: one scholarly publication and one episode of the television show "Grey's Anatomy." Dr. Rosen lets him know that he likely has up to two years to live, but that surgery could possibly extend that time up to ten years. Dr. Rosen wants to schedule surgery as soon as possible, but A.J. is unsure of how much his insurance will cover. He is also unsure of the outcome of the surgery and is afraid it will leave him in a vegetative state.

On his way home from the doctor, A.J. thinks about Maya's future college expenses and Amelia's ability to pay the mortgage. He meets Lambiase to have a drink in an attempt to distract himself from the fact that he has cancer. Lambiase tells A.J. a story about a kid who used to live on Alice Island who used to skip school, just so he could read a book called "Infinite Jest," that he couldn't read at home because his family was too big and distracting. Lambiase helped the kid get back to school on a daily basis. A.J. figures out that Lambiase's story isn't true, but he appreciates the encouraging gesture. A.J. then nonchalantly tells Lambiase he has cancer in his brain. Lambiase convinces A.J. to let Maya and Amelia help him decide if he should have the surgery.

The scene switches to Ismay and Lambiase lying in bed. He lets her know that he knows about Maya's backpack in the closet and "Tamerlane" inside that backpack. He wants to get it back to A.J. so it can be sold, providing A.J. with the money needed for the surgery. Ismay is not upset that he knows, nor that he hasn't said anything. Ismay explains to Lambiase that Marian Wallace came to her house to try and get Daniel to



help financially with Maya. Ismay was angry and screamed at Marian Wallace, calling her a slut and telling her that if she can get Daniel to admit Maya is his, she'll see if she can get Marian some help. That night Ismay had talked to Daniel on the phone; it was a good conversation so she didn't bring up Marian Wallace or the baby. She decided she would take it upon herself to pay off Marian Wallace so they would never be bothered again. One night soon after her encounter with Marian Wallace, Ismay had gone to check on A.J., who was passed out drunk in his apartment. "Tamerlane" had been lying on a table, and without thinking about it she took it.

The next day, Ismay went to Marian Wallace in Cambridge, Mass., and told her to sell "Tamerlane" because it's such a rare book that it will get her a lot of money. Soon after, Marian shows up at Ismay's house again with the book and says she can't sell it because it's not registered as a rare book and because the local cops had been calling about a stolen copy of "Tamerlane." Marian gives the book back to Ismay, but Ismay throws it back at Marian. The book lands on the floor, and Maya starts looking through it and eventually colors on the outside of it. When Marian and Maya leave, Ismay notices that Maya left the backpack and the colored-on book. She puts the book in the backpack and stashes it in her closet. That same night, A.J. calls Ismay about the proper things to feed a baby because Maya has been left in the bookstore. The day after, Marian washes up on shore. Daniel never says anything about Marian Wallace or the baby, and he never notices the child's backpack in Ismay's closet. Lambiase assures her that it all worked out, since Maya's life has turned out beautifully.

The night after Ismay tells Lambiase her story, Lambiase goes to his Chief's Choice Book Club at Island Books. He carries with him a padded manila envelope with A.J.'s name on it. It contains "Tamerlane", but A.J. thinks it's just a galley and therefore doesn't open it right away. Instead, he finds the next book for Lambiase's book club.

## Analysis

After reading the chapter, the reader can see why A.J. chose "Ironhead" as his intro, since it has to do with parents with heads like a pumpkin--sturdy on the outside but mushy and useless on the inside--who have a baby with a head made of iron. Ultimately they are strong inside and out. A.J. is diagnosed with cancer in this chapter, and therefore is now living with the fact that his brain will not be working the same from here on out. In fact, it has been slowly deteriorating, though the doctor predicts that A.J. has possibly a few months, possibly two years, and possibly up to ten years to live, though she cannot guarantee the quality of life from here on out.

A.J.'s illness has been present since the beginning of the novel, since the author has written in his absence seizures since Chapter 2. He states he's had them since he was a child, but aside from seizure medication and keeping his stress level low, the doctor has not had any additional suggestions as to what might help stave them off. He seems unsurprised at his diagnosis, but that is likely the manifestation of A.J.'s personality, where he tends to downplay everything that isn't related to a book. Since his immediate thoughts are how he will provide for Maya and Amelia if he has to pay for the surgery--



or worse, if he fails to beat the cancer--A.J. is clearly impacted by the news. A.J. best expresses his love for Amelia and Maya in how he cares for their physical needs, which he cannot do if he has no money.

The reader can also tell that the news of having Glioblastoma multiforme has strongly impacted A.J. by the way he drops it in to regular conversation that his brain is broken. A.J. is an internal processor, and he seems to have kept the information to himself in order to process it until he couldn't keep it to himself any longer. Lambiase has been A.J.'s closest friend since A.J. adopted Maya, so it makes sense that he would be the first one A.J. tells. True his being an honest, caring friend, Lambiase is the one who encourages A.J. to give Maya and Amelia the option of A.J. having the surgery. Human life is very important to Lambiase, and so are his friends. Lambiase does not want to see A.J. suffer by himself, and he also doesn't want Maya or Amelia to have potentially been able to weigh in on a big decision but be denied that opportunity because A.J. doesn't want to burden them.

The reader finally learns more about how and why Ismay has "Tamerlane" in a child's backpack in her closet. The reader also learns more about why Maya never took to Ismay and why Ismay has been so hard on herself and thinking herself a bad person. When Ismay revealed to Daniel that she knew about Maya in Chapter 7, there were no details given about how events transpired between Daniel and Marian sleeping together and Maya being left at Island Books. The story Ismay tells can be expected by the reader, since hints have been present all along: Maya crying immediately upon seeing Ismay the night she was dropped off at Island Books; Ismay moving forward in conversation and not dwelling on anything related to Maya, Marian, or "Tamerlane"; Ismay beginning to attempt suicide in the same manner as Marian Wallace; and Ismay stating when she had the miscarriage that it was payback for her being a bad person. The redemption Ismay has experienced in her life is expressed with Lambiase when he tells her that she is not a bad person, that taking "Tamerlane" may have saved A.J.'s life since it was that event that ultimately led to Maya being left in Island Books. Lambiase knows that his friend would have likely gone down an incredibly destructive path had he not had to raise a child. Ismay appreciates Lambiase's kindness, and seems to feel safer than she has ever felt with another man, since she is open with him about how she came to possess "Tamerlane" and she doesn't anger when she finds out that he's known for a long time.

The beginning of the chapter with A.J.'s mom gifting him, Amelia, and Maya the e-reader is significant, as well. Though A.J. doesn't know of his diagnosis yet, he still is a man who doesn't like change. Anything that represents change seems to A.J. a threat, some greater than others. The reaction A.J. gives to receiving an e-reader reiterates A.J.'s perspective on change: he doesn't like it, and almost seems to wish he could stop time. In his explosion of anger. A.J. tells his mom that the gift she has just given him is not only going to eventually put him out of business, but it's also going to be one of the major causes of the decline of society. Though his reaction to the gift has likely been strengthened by the stress of the holidays, once the reader learns of A.J.'s brain tumor, it is clear that his brain is functioning differently due to the illness. Though he is the same as he's always been with Maya and Amelia, the reaction as well as his blackout



during his run indicate decreased brain functioning and therefore lead into the cancer diagnosis. Therefore, his mood is much more volatile than usual, especially considering the stress of the holidays.

## Discussion Question 1

Why might the holidays be a significant source of stress for A.J.? Explain your answer.

## Discussion Question 2

What does A.J.'s main concern seem to be with having Glioblastoma multiforme?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Ismay telling Lambiase her entire story with Marian Wallace and Maya?

## Vocabulary

e-reader, twitching, pension, infernal, vibrant, unceremonious, contraption, farsighted, purveyor, improbably, seizure, prognosis, oncologist, aphasia





# Part II, Chapter 12: What We Talk about When We Talk about Love

## Summary

A.J.'s synopsis of Raymond Carver's short story collection, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love," is expressed in just one line. The rest of the notes concern his wondering why it's easier to write about the things we hate than the things we love. He also tells Maya that she and Amelia are his favorite people.

"Tamerlane" sells for \$72,000. After fees and taxes, the amount is enough to cover A.J.'s surgery and the first round of radiation. He continues to question whether or not he should have the surgery, but Maya and Amelia tell him to have the surgery.

At the hospital, as A.J. waits for his surgery, he and Amelia spend time together in his hospital room. Amelia laments that "The Late Bloomer" was a crock. She acknowledges that she used to love that story but that she didn't want to be in "some stupid play version" of it in her 40s. A.J. again asks if it's worth the money to get the surgery, since even if it works his quality of life might not be so great, anyway. Amelia says it is worth it. Amelia also weeps a little after she tells A.J. that she likes his brain and doesn't want it to deteriorate. She then asks A.J. if she can still have sex with him if he's a vegetable. A.J. becomes uncomfortable, and they change the subject. A.J. is wheeled away to surgery; Amy tells him she loves him.

After the surgery, A.J. is confined for a monthlong round of radiation. His immune system is so compromised that he can have no visitors. He feels the loneliest he's felt since Nic's death. The radiation does not work to shrink the tumor, but the tumor also has not grown. The oncologist tells A.J. in a fairly chipper tone of voice that that A.J.'s general capacities will likely deteriorate in the coming months. A.J. reads on the e-reader to pass the time.

## Analysis

The chapter introduction makes it clear that Amelia and Maya mean the world to A.J. Not only does he explicitly state that Maya and Amelia are his favorite people, but the book he chooses to write a note for Maya about is about love. Since A.J. is more reserved in his expression of positive feelings, including a book that's all about love in his collection of book notes for Maya is significant and one of the most personal things he could think to leave for her.

Throughout most of the novel, A.J. has taken his life-plot twists in decent stride: He took on Maya almost immediately; there was no mention from the author of A.J.'s reaction when he found "Tamerlane" not only in the envelope but in colored-on condition; there is no mention of missing Daniel after his passing; and once he learns that Lambiase is



interested in Ismay he accepts it. However, his cancer diagnosis is a different story. He knows what it's like to be the one left behind by a loved one who dies young. He hates the thought of doing that to Amelia and Maya. His doubts about having the surgery seem to be rooted in fear: what if it doesn't work? what if it does work, but he's not at full capacity? what if he dies during surgery? A.J. wants to be well for his family, but he knows that's not an option. It seems he would rather wait out the illness rather than try to fix it at the hands of a surgeon. A.J. is having a hard time dealing with his prognosis: no matter what, his life span is shorter and his quality of life will continue to decline depending on how quickly his brain deteriorates.

One of the reasons Amelia is well-suited to be A.J.'s wife is because she expresses her positive emotions in a subtle manner, just as A.J. does and seems to prefer others do, as well. She is firm about A.J. getting the surgery, as is Maya, but does not express that in a big, dramatic way. She also makes sure he knows that she loves him. She thinks she should say something more clever, but in the moment that's the only set of words she can think to say. Since it is short, sweet, and to the point, A.J. likely appreciates it. He also probably understands that because she used the phrase "I love you" instead of something witty and sarcastic, her heart is likely hurting more than he's ever known. Her words are failing her as it is such a powerful moment.

The portion of their conversation regarding "The Late Bloomer" is significant, as well. Amelia has still not told A.J. the truth about the story being a novel written by a woman instead of a memoir written by a man. However, she laments that it is a disingenuous piece of literature. It is the first book she and A.J. loved together; it holds special meaning for Amelia and for A.J., but since Amelia knows the truth about the story and its author, the sanctity of the book is ruined for her. To put this together with A.J.'s life-changing diagnosis and surgery is to compare the death of what she thought was and would be, to what actually is.

Unfortunately, A.J. ends the chapter feeling lonely as he is kept in confinement. His thinking about how lonely he is lets the reader know that Amelia and Maya have filled his life. He wasn't looking for anything or anyone to keep him company. In fact he wanted to die. At this point, the reader can see a self-transformation as A.J. goes from preferring to be alone to easily bringing people into his life about whom he cares greatly.

## Discussion Question 1

Even though A.J.'s prognosis is likely the same whether or not he has the surgery, what are some reasons Maya and Amelia might want A.J. to have the surgery?

## Discussion Question 2

What emotion is A.J. most strongly displaying when he debates with Amelia about having the surgery?



## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of A.J. reading on his e-reader while at the hospital?

## Vocabulary

connoisseur, overstated, radiation, hokum, terrorist, bona fide, pitiable, resigned, hemorrhoids, irradiated, deteriorate



## Part II, Chapter 13: The Bookseller

### Summary

The chapter intro details A.J.'s thoughts on "The Bookseller," a book by Roald Dahl. A.J. briefly comments on the characters and plot, saying that he connects with the characters in this book and that he believes that's the biggest point of living life: to connect.

A.J. is now on his deathbed, trying to communicate but unable to do so. He tries to tell Maya that in the end, a person is a collection of works. He also tries to tell her that words help people to feel things, things they weren't sure they could feel. He cries, and Maya asks him not to cry. Aside from speaking, A.J. has trouble reading. He can, however, write, and the narrator notes that A.J. has been writing brief paragraphs for Maya as a final gift to her.

Maya asks A.J. if he's afraid. In his mind, he tells her he's not afraid of dying but rather of the fact that every day there is less of himself because of how he's deteriorating. He wants to tell her that "we are what we love," but all he can get out is "love."

A.J.'s funeral is a community affair. Amelia and Maya are approached about the future of Island Books, but Amelia is unsure of what to do. She needs a steady paycheck and health insurance, especially now that she is responsible for Maya. Ultimately Amelia decides to close the store even though she loves it and all that it represents.

Lambiase suggests to Ismay over breakfast that the two of them purchase Island Books so that it can remain Alice Island's bookstore. At first Ismay is opposed to the idea, but through conversation with Lambiase, she agrees that it's a good idea.

A few years after she sells the bookstore, Amelia leaves Knightley Press. It's too much traveling and Maya is graduating soon from high school. Amelia leaves a note for Jacob Gardner, the man taking over her position. She lets him know that Lambiase is a wonderful bookseller, and Ismay excels at throwing author events. She mentions that A.J. started Island Books and that the collection used to be more literary fiction, but the new owners aren't as particular and won't take anything they can't sell. She contemplates leaving a personal note about the store, but decides not to.

Jacob Gardner reads the note left for him by Amelia. He feels lucky to have landed this job, and is looking forward to going to Island Books. He believes in Knightley's list, is carrying a heavy bag with many of those books in it, and enthusiastically begins his journey as a Knightley Publishing sales rep.



## Analysis

The title of the chapter fits A.J.'s collection of book notes for Maya for one main reason: he has always seen his life as a narrative, and so closing out the collection of book notes with a novel called "The Bookseller" is fitting. The author has made it clear that A.J. sees his life as a narrative, and as such, it is fitting that he would leave his last book note to be one about a bookseller such as himself. While A.J. knows the novel is not about him, he connects to the characters and seems to enjoy titling his life as one titles a novel. In the intro he writes to Maya that connecting with others is the main point of living life. While this perspective is in stark contradiction to A.J.'s personality in the beginning of the novel, it fits with the rest of the book notes (chapter intros) A.J. has been writing for Maya. Each of the chapter intros have gotten progressively more sentimental and leaning more toward life advice rather than book notes, although bits of life advice have been present in each note.

The reader learns for certain that the collection of notes A.J. has been writing which the reader experiences as the chapter introductions have been written as he lay on his death bed and has trouble communicating. The varied length of the notes then makes sense, as having an illness such as A.J. has would offer some good days and some bad days. Another important note about the chapter intro lies in that the author of "The Bookseller" is Roald Dahl, the same author as the book used for the Chapter 1 introduction. Using the same author at the beginning as at the end is another way the author can show that A.J. sees his life as a narrative: just as books on a bookshelf are often book-ended between two book-ends, so too is A.J.'s collection of book notes book-ended by two books authored by the same man.

Details of when and exactly how A.J. died are not included, which fits with the tone of the rest of the novel. The author's message seems to be that what is to be written about is the journey rather than the end-game. The author has shown the attitude in the way she writes about the following: A.J.'s thought process leading up to adoption, but not the actual signing of the papers; A.J. and Amelia's relationship leading up to the wedding, but very little of the actual wedding; leading up to the surgery and then a brief note about the radiation treatment, but no details about either; and finally, the events leading up to A.J.'s death but not details of the actual death or the funeral. More step-by-step details are present for Ismay, as the author chooses to describe in detail Daniel's death, as well as Marian and Maya's visit before Marian ended her life. However, A.J. is the central character and as such, the author seems to have written in this style when it comes to him, as A.J.'s personality does not lend itself to being overly detailed in talking about himself.

The fact that Lambiase and Ismay purchase and continue to run Island Books as Alice Island's only bookstore is significant. Not only does it show the legacy that A.J. has left, likely without even intending to do so, but it also shows a sense of community. Neither Lambiase or Ismay want to live on an island where there is no bookstore, and the bookstore is something that has been a meaningful part of both their lives. Though their motivation might be different--Lambiase because he has come to love books and Ismay



because she enjoys feeling part of a team--their consensus shows that Alice Island is their home, and they want to honor what A.J. and Nic started.

The author ends the novel with Amelia's replacement at Knightley Press. The significance of including him may be drawn from more than one aspect. First, it is important for the reader to see the small differences in how Island Books is ran now that Lambiase and Ismay are in charge, one of which is the fact that they take more "best-selling" items as opposed to mostly literary fiction as A.J. used to do. Second, A.J. stated earlier in the novel that he likes for things to be full-circle and for every piece of a narrative to have a purpose; by introducing the person who will take Amelia's place, every question is answered and the story has come full-circle. This echoes A.J.'s use of two Roald Dahl books to organize his notes. The author suggests that there is a symmetry to life.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the difference between how A.J. communicates at the beginning of the novel, versus how he wishes he could communicate at the end of the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Ismay seem to use as her tipping point for agreeing to buy Island Books?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some parallels between Amelia when she first approached Island Books, and Jacob Gardner as he now approaches Island Books?

## Vocabulary

bonbon, opportunistic, grotesques, gibberish, tenable, disembarks, vaudevillians



# Characters

## A.J. Fikry

A.J. is the main character in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." At the beginning of the novel, he is a man in his late 30s who is recently widowed and owns the only bookstore on a small island near Cape Cod, Massachusetts. He is a quirky man who acts like he prefers to be by himself by the way he keeps most people at a distance during his interactions with them. However, when he drinks alcohol he seems to find all of the cons about living by one's self. It is not until Maya is dropped in his bookstore that he outwardly expresses the sentiment of not wanting to be alone, though he doesn't do so through words, only actions. It's important for the reader to note how automatically A.J. accepts Maya as his own. From the beginning, he is tired but unafraid of caring for her. He does not hesitate in asking to adopt her, and the fact that the author summarizes the adoption instead of detailing it suggests that it felt like the next natural step for A.J. He didn't ponder for any sort of time; he just embraced Maya as his daughter and himself as her father. From there, A.J. grows to care for Chief Lambiase as a close friend. Publishing representative Amelia Loman is first his girlfriend then his wife. When they are married and he has a small family, he observes that he's never been so happy.

A.J. sees his entire life as one long narrative, hence the title of the novel, and it is through that frame of reference that A.J. copes with everything and everyone that crosses his path. He sees other people as characters in his story, and he treats them as such. He likes resolution in real life, just as he expects resolution in his books. A.J. also appreciates and prefers continuity, that nothing should exist without a purpose. For this reason, A.J. only stocks books that he believes have a purpose deeper than simply to sell books. He will hold just a minimal stock of books he doesn't believe in, simply to stay afloat in his business. By and large, however, he has a specific taste for books and a central theme of them is that they all have what A.J. considers to be a significant purpose.

A.J. is extremely proud of Maya, especially as she grows up to be just as literary as himself. He makes sure she knows he loves her, even though he doesn't always communicate it with his words. He does things like leaves her lists of books that could help with her writing, and writing small blurbs about books that might be helpful to her in the future. A.J. also defends her short story as the one that should've won the county-wide short-story contest, and then he shakes her hand, letting Maya know that he thinks of her not only as a daughter but as a full-fledged writer.

Most of the novel is told through A.J.'s perspective by way of an omniscient third-person narrator. The reader can see A.J.'s demeanor change from lonely and angry to knowing he is loved. He goes from wanting to drink his life away, to not wanting to go through the long, drawn out process of dying. When A.J. is diagnosed with cancer at the end of the novel, he loses his ability to verbally communicate. The narrator gives A.J.'s thoughts, which are that he is not afraid of dying, but of no longer being able to communicate what





he wants to his wife and daughter. Though A.J. is not the kind of person to give grand gestures of affection, he does like to communicate, even if it's by way of dissecting books.

## Maya Tamerlane Fikry

Maya is not introduced until the third chapter, but she is the first person to influence A.J.'s transformation. She is just more than 2 years old when she is left by her biological mother in A.J.'s Island Books bookstore. Though she cries like a typical toddler would, she is also from the beginning quite content in her circumstances. She accepts A.J. as her father almost immediately and finds a safety in him that she may not have had with her single, financially unstable mother.

A.J. describes Maya as cerebral, meaning she's always thinking about something. She is content with a book in the bookstore or upstairs in their apartment. When the novel starts, Maya is just over two years old; when the novel concludes she is a teenager. Maya's point of view and opinions are not given much of the narrator's focus, though she is a constant presence in the story and a favorite of A.J. and Lambiase. As a young girl, Maya is honest and seems emotionally well, despite having been orphaned. She has typical young girl interests, including pink party dresses and animals, though she is mostly into reading. She does not mind hanging out in the bookstore, and in fact prefers to do so while reading whatever book interests her. A.J. begins to carry more picture books because of Maya, and Maya seems to appreciate it.

As a teenager Maya becomes slightly more moody, though she remains respectful and emotionally close with A.J. She has made it known that she wants to be a writer, and so she takes her creative writing assignments very seriously. She wins third place in a county-wide short-story contest, and thinks her dad is disappointed in her until on their way home A.J. defends her story and then shakes her hand. Maya knows that this is A.J.'s way of communicating immense pride. When A.J. becomes ill and cannot speak, she tries hard to understand him but it is impossible since A.J.'s words don't come out as words, but rather just as garbled sounds. Her point of view is not given after A.J.'s death, but given her way of quickly adjusting to changes, the reader might assume that while she will be sad, she will also know that the end of her father's life is not the end of hers.

## Amelia Loman

Amelia is one of the main characters in "The Stories Life of A.J. Fikry." She is one of the first characters to show up in the novel, yet after the first chapter is not mentioned again for a few chapters. She is a woman who is passionate about books and prides herself in being a good salesperson. After her first interaction with A.J. when he is quite rude to her, Amelia backs off when she visits Island Books and keeps their interactions as professional as possible. She does take an interest in Maya, however, and Maya takes a liking to her, as well. Amelia's favorite book she ever sold is "The Late Bloomer," a





book that is titled as a memoir but come to find out is a novel that is ghostwritten. The author's betrayal hits Amelia hard, as she views book integrity as an important trait in others, especially those in the literary profession.

Though she is put off by A.J.'s quirkiness and crankiness upon their first meeting, Amelia comes to care deeply for A.J. She is engaged to a soldier, but breaks it off with him due to their lack of common interests. After she and A.J. begin talking about "The Late Bloomer," the television series "True Blood," and have a video chat, Amelia warms up to his personality and the two fall in love, eventually marrying.

Amelia is similar to A.J. in that she does not engage in grand, outward expressions of her feelings. She's not stoic, but she's not given to lavish shows of emotion unless the object of that emotion is a book. She is a good fit for A.J. in this way because the two can be secure in their feelings for one another because they understand how the other person operates. Even at the end of the novel when A.J. is going in for surgery to hopefully remove his tumor, she tells him she loves him but only after lamenting that she will miss his brain once it starts to deteriorate. Her pragmatic thoughts tend to be expressed rather than deep emotion.

Amelia and Maya form a solid stepmother-stepdaughter relationship, though Maya always calls her by 'Amelia' instead of "Mom" or even "Amy" (Amelia's nickname). A.J. only calls her Amy a couple times; he prefers the sound of Amelia. Once A.J. passes away, Amelia and Maya separate themselves from the bookstore and Amelia finds a new role in the literary profession. She is glad to have spent part of her life with A.J., and she does not make any indication that taking care of Maya is an inconvenience. Throughout the novel, Amelia is sure of herself and seems to know who she is, what she likes, what doesn't like, what she wants out of life, and what she doesn't want out of life. This may be a reason for A.J.'s taking to her, since he, too, has a solid handle on the things he wants in his life.

## Chief Lambiase

Chief Lambiase is one of the main characters in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." He is a police chief in town and goes from being the one who is present when A.J. reports Tamerlane as missing to being A.J.'s closest and most trusted friend. He is divorced and has no children, and while he doesn't necessarily miss his wife he misses having company and having someone to go home to after work. He is a self-identified non-reader until he starts spending time with A.J. and Maya. Then he not only becomes a reader but also starts the Chief's Choice Book Club, held at Island Books on a regular basis. He is inspired to be better by A.J.'s presence and A.J.'s love for books. The reader also finds out that Lambiase has feelings for Ismay, who is an English teacher, so that may also be a reason he chooses to start reading more.

Maya likes Lambiase right away, which suggests that even though he is a police chief Lambiase has a calm demeanor about him that makes him appealing as a friend and as a babysitter. He is honest with A.J., but also shows his friend some grace when he



knows a topic is awkward for A.J. to discuss, for example going to Rhode Island to see Amelia. Lambiase's peaceful and respectful personality also shows itself when he waits a sufficient amount of time after Daniel's death to pursue Ismay. He presents himself as a gentleman who cares greatly for others and for his community as a whole.

## Ismay Parish

At the beginning of the novel, Ismay is Daniel Parish's wife, A.J.'s sister-in-law, and an English teacher at the local high school. She is known around the community for doing the annual theatre production at the high school, as well as being Daniel Parish's wife. She projects an image of being an unhappy woman in her late 30s who wishes many things were different about her life. She likes Amelia, but has trouble warming up to her since Amelia is replacing Ismay's sister Nic as the love of A.J.'s life. She resents her body because of the several miscarriages she's had, and she considers herself a woman who used to be good but was made bad because of her bad husband who cheats on her regularly.

Ismay is a woman who seems to stew in her misery, but the author shows her as reaching a breaking point. After Daniel comes home obviously having been drinking too much, and then she watches him flirt with the maid of honor at A.J.'s wedding, she decides to tell Daniel that she doesn't love him anymore. She stands up for herself for the first time, and when she does, Daniel's side of the vehicle is hit hard enough that he doesn't survive the crash. She shows no regret over having stood up for herself and told him that she knew the truth about Maya being his biological daughter. Even when asked if she misses him posthumously, her words and tone convey that she does not miss him. Eventually, the reader is made aware of the regret Ismay displays is over the way she treated Marian Wallace when Marian tried to get in touch with Daniel, a painful experience she recounts to Lambiase. However, even then, her remorse and any positive feelings she may express don't go toward Daniel.

It is after Daniel's death that Ismay's demeanor seems to drastically improve. Though she is not happy to be growing older, the relationship she forms with Chief Lambiase seems to bring her joy. She still misses her sister, but she is being treated well by a kind man who doesn't judge her nor does he cheat on her. She confesses only to him that she has been hiding Tamerlane, and that Marian Wallace came to visit and she turned her away. The anger and distrust Ismay displays in the beginning of the novel has been replaced by a trust in someone who has earned it.

## Marian Wallace

Marian Wallace is Maya's biological mother. She commits suicide after leaving Maya in Island Books to be taken care of by A.J. She is a young African American girl who once had a promising future. Maya writes about her in her short story, "A Trip to the Beach." In Maya's short story, which seems to contain some element of truth, the reader learns that Marian Wallace's mom lived in a shelter for homeless women. Marian needed a



place to stay so she could finish school and try to raise her daughter, but Marian's mom refused. Marian comes across as desperate and feeling unworthy of being Maya's mother. Just before Daniel Parish's death, the reader learns that Marian was a fan of his. They slept together, conceiving Maya in the process.

After Ismay and Lambiase begin dating, the reader learns that Marian attempted to contact Daniel through Ismay, but that Ismay threw Marian out of her home out of anger. Marian tried to get help from Daniel so that she could be responsible and hopefully properly care for Maya. However, since Ismay turned her away and Daniel made himself scarce, Marian felt she had no choice but to leave Maya in the bookstore and then end her life.

## Daniel Parish

Daniel Parish is A.J.'s brother-in-law by way of Daniel's wife, Ismay, who is Nic's sister. Daniel is an author who is most well-known for his first novel. Only one of his books is described, and it is a contemporary romance novel. He spends a good amount of his time at the bookstore and takes well to Maya. Daniel is known in the community for his infidelity to Ismay, who has had multiple miscarriages, much to her dismay.

Daniel is not known on Alice Island as a moral man. Though he supports A.J. and listens to A.J.'s troubles over some drinks, Daniel does not show any remorse for any of the times he cheats on his wife. He also puts no effort into hiding his attempts to woo other women, as the reader can see when he openly flirts with the maid of honor at Amelia and A.J.'s wedding.

Daniel's wife Ismay reveals to the reader that Maya is his biological daughter and that she knows Marian Wallace (Maya's biological mother) was a woman whom Daniel had slept with. Immediately after this conversation, Daniel dies in a car accident during a strong rainstorm. Ismay only suffers minor injuries. Daniel's last thoughts before dying are the following: how he is unhappy with how he has described car accidents in his past writing; and how he would describe a serious car accident now that he's been in one.

Daniel's death represents more than just the character's end. Ismay has just confronted Daniel about his constant infidelity, the fact that she believes he's a bad person, and the fact that she doesn't love him anymore. The entire scene leading up to the car accident is a culmination of Ismay finding her voice and her confidence to stand up to Daniel. The fact that he dies just moments after Ismay's confidence arises is symbolic of Ismay being able to start fresh. She has found the inner strength to stand up to the man who has made her feel ashamed, humiliated, and unworthy, and now she can walk away from him free and clear without any repercussions.



## Alice Island community

The Alice Island community includes several groups of people, all of whom make up A.J.'s client base:

The Alice Island Mothers: these women check up on A.J. for a certain amount of time after he adopts Maya. They make sure he is feeding her well, tending to her the correct way, and that he is truly able to care for a toddler girl.

Chief's Choice Book Club: Chief Lambiase starts a book club after he's been hanging around Island Books with Maya and A.J. The members of this book club are Lambiase's colleagues: Sylvio from Dispatch, Kathy from Homicide, Rosie the firefighter, Deputy Doug Lippman, and Deputy Dave.

Well-meaning townie: This is the nickname A.J. gives to the people who, for a short period of time after Tamerlane is stolen, ask him regularly about the missing Tamerlane. These well-meaning and curious community members account for a slight uptick in business for A.J. He reflects that this was not the case after Nic died.

Women A.J. dates: When Lambiase finds out that A.J. wants to date Amelia but can't, he sets A.J. up with a couple women. He sleeps with one of them but finds it difficult to truly relate to either one of them.

## Leon Friedman/Leonora Ferris

Leon Friedman is the author who pens "The Late Bloomer," the book Amelia says is the book she and A.J. first shared a love for together. The reader meets Leon Friedman when A.J. hosts a book signing with Friedman as the main attraction. However, Friedman shows up more to drink alcohol than anything else, and the event is considered a disaster when Friedman vomits from having too much to drink.

Amelia meets Leonora Ferris while cleaning up from the book signing and realizes that Leonora Ferris is the actual writer of Leon Friedman's book. Amelia understands that "The Late Bloomer" is not a memoir, but rather a work of fiction. This piece of knowledge makes Amelia very angry, and she stays fairly bitter about it for many years after learning that one of her favorite books was a made-up story rather than a touching recounting of someone's actual life experience. Leonora Ferris seems to feel no guilt that her title isn't labeled as a work of fiction. Rather, she is more concerned with knowing that her novel meant something to someone.

## Dr. Rosen

Dr. Rosen is A.J.'s doctor. She is the mother of one of A.J.'s teenage employees. A.J. sees Dr. Rosen in the beginning of the novel when Lambiase insists he go to the hospital after an absence seizure, and she is seen again by the reader when she



diagnoses A.J. with Glioblastoma multiforme, a type of cancer that gives A.J. less than two years to live. She is fairly non-sentimental and straight-forward, which makes her a good match for A.J. since he tends to be the same.

## Mr. Balboni

Mr. Balboni is a minor character. He is Maya's Creative Writing teacher. Mr. Balboni believes in Maya's ability as a writer and demonstrates that opinion by choosing her short story as a contestant in a county short-story contest. He encourages Maya to try another form of storytelling outside of anthropomorphizing. Though Maya's story does not win first place, she seems pleased that he believes in her writing enough to enter it in the first place.

## Nic Fikry

Nic is A.J.'s late wife. She is a minor character, as she exists in one conversation A.J. shares with her in a dream and the rest only in memories and references. Nic is the reason A.J. owns Island Books, as it was her idea to open the store. She was also the one to put together author events hosted by Island Books. Until A.J. meets Amelia, he doesn't believe he could ever be happy again after having lost Nic to a car accident. Nic was on her way home from driving an author to the airport.

Nic is Ismay's sister, and references from Ismay about Nic are always that Nic was prettier than she, as well as smarter and better than she. While Ismay's sentiments are not made in a jealous tone, they are made in a tone that suggests an inflexible opinion on the part of Ismay.

## Margaret Loman

Margaret is Amelia's mom and is a minor character in the novel. She is against Amelia's relationship with A.J. and obviously has a difficult time accepting him and his lifestyle when she visits during Leon Friedman's author visit. Margaret is described in Amelia's eyes as being difficult and hard to get along with, and she proves to be just that when the reader meets her.

## Paula Fikry

Paula Fikry is A.J.'s mom. She is only in one portion of the book, and is therefore a minor character. She is significant to the story, though, because she gifts to A.J., Amelia, and Maya each an e-reader, a device which A.J. is vehemently against at first. The e-reader ends up being a symbol for the change that A.J. is not embracing, and the interaction A.J. and Paula share speaks to A.J.'s personality in the beginning of the novel: standoffish, extraordinarily picky and set in his ways, and a man who has little-to-no filter when it comes to the words that come out of his mouth.



## Maya's classmates

Maya is enrolled in a Creative Writing class. She submits a story for an assignment and her teacher reads it aloud, leaving it up to her classmates for criticism and critique. Maya maturely accepts the criticisms and critiques, knowing that's what a class like this is designed for. One of Maya's classmates, John Furness, has an entry along with Maya in the county's short-story contest. He wins first place while Maya wins third place, but he makes it clear that he has feelings for Maya and would like to date her. Though it is only mentioned in passing, Maya and John do become boyfriend and girlfriend.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## "Tamerlane"

"Tamerlane" is a central object in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." It is a rare book of poems written by Edgar Allan Poe; only 50 copies were ever printed and in the novel A.J. owns one of them. The book itself is meant for A.J.'s retirement, as it has been known to sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It is stolen one night after A.J. has passed out drunk. Its whereabouts remain a mystery until much later in the novel, when Lambiase discovers it in Ismay's closet. Its significance lies in two major plot points of the story: one, if "Tamerlane" had never been stolen, A.J. never would have left his door unlocked, and Maya never would have been left there by her mother; and two, when "Tamerlane" is recovered and finally sold, it pays for A.J.'s surgery, buying him up to two years more of life after being diagnosed with Glioblastoma multiforme.

A.J. sells "Tamerlane" at an auction. It does not go for the full price he had originally intended when he found it at a garage sale more than 10 years prior, but it is enough to cover the surgery and the first round of radiation. Aside from the physical release of "Tamerlane" from his possession, the selling of the book represents great change, as well as parting with loved and rare things. A.J. is about to undergo a serious surgery and an intense round of lonely radiation, after which he will live for about a year and then pass away. A.J. has to say goodbye to Amelia and Maya, and vice versa, and his parting with "Tamerlane" is just the beginning of his parting with the things he loves.

## Google

A.J. is a man who does not like change and seems to prefer that he and everyone else reject major technological and cultural advances, especially e-readers. He is a stubborn man who likes what he likes and that's that, and what he likes tends to be classic or classically written literary fiction. Even so, A.J. depends on Google quite often, especially at the beginning of the novel. He mainly uses it to find out how to care for Maya in terms of feeding her and bathing her. Therefore, even though he is generally opposed to change, A.J. is not reluctant to utilize tools that will enhance his knowledge of a subject.

## Books

Since this is a novel about a bookstore owner, it's not surprising that the most prevalent object in the story is books. When imagining the story as the author describes it, the reader can picture more books than anything else. They line the shelves of the store, the hallway leading to A.J.'s office, A.J.'s own apartment on his nightstand and tables, and then at Amelia's house in Rhode Island, her favorite book leans against a lamp. Marian Wallace leaves Maya at Island Books because she wants Maya to grow up around books and around readers; A.J. presents Maya with a list of books to read when





she hits a writer's block; and each chapter introduction is a short note about a book left for Maya from A.J. Books are the central object in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" and also tie into A.J.'s life philosophy that life is a story and narrative.

## Daniel's trip to Hollywood

When Daniel goes to Hollywood, Ismay has just had another miscarriage. Daniel's trip is a way for him to avoid her, but it's also a way for him to say through actions instead of words that he does not want to be married. His regular adulterous behavior speaks to that sentiment as well, but when he travels to Hollywood during a time when his wife is deeply hurting, Daniel is showing his wife that he wishes to be a free man.

## Maya's middle name

A.J. makes Maya's middle name Tamerlane, after the collection of Edgar Allan Poe poems that were stolen just before Maya was left in his bookstore. An unlikely middle name, A.J. likely assigned it to Maya for two reasons: the collection of works meant a lot to him, and also because it was the disappearance of "Tamerlane" that led to Maya's appearance. Without "Tamerlane" getting stolen, he knows he probably wouldn't have ended up being Maya's father. And although being someone's father is not something that ever crossed his mind before Maya, A.J. rather enjoys it and seems to be naturally good at it. Maya's middle name of Tamerlane signifies A.J.'s ability to quickly adapt, and to make light of a potentially dark situation.

## "The Late Bloomer" by Leon Friedman

"The Late Bloomer" is the book Amelia most strongly pitches at her first meeting with A.J. in chapter 1. She believes in the story, touted as a memoir, and believes that it could be a huge seller. A.J. doesn't agree and therefore doesn't buy it, however several chapters later when he is holding an ill Maya, it is the only readable thing near him. Upon reading it, he is moved deeply enough that he cries. "The Late Bloomer" is the first book that A.J. and Amelia loved together, giving it significant meaning in their relationship.

Later in the novel, "The Late Bloomer" takes on a different meaning when Amelia finds out that it's not a memoir written by an 80-something year old man, but rather a novel written by a much younger woman. Amelia is bothered that one of the foundations of her and A.J.'s initial friendship is a lie. While this could lead to her questioning their relationship, Amelia is able to see the situation for what it is: a woman who lied in order to sell her story. Amelia is mostly able to separate her love of the story from her dislike for the author. "The Late Bloomer" continues to hold great meaning for A.J. and Amelia, as a passage from the book is read at their wedding.





## Maya's short story: "A Trip to the Beach"

For her Creative Writing class, Maya writes a short story called "A Trip to the Beach". It is her version of how she ultimately came to be left at Island Books by her mother. The story symbolizes a few things: one, it is a representation of how A.J. sees his life as one long narrative and his wish that everyone else would do the same. He seems to have passed that perspective down to his daughter, who turns a short story assignment into a semi-autobiographical piece. The story is also a picture of how Maya's mother's wishes have come to fruition: Maya has been surrounded by people who love books, and has therefore come to love books and stories so much that she wants to become a writer. Maya's story is also a way for Maya to express in a safe way that she still wonders about her mom sometimes. Though she appears to be completely content with A.J. as her father, it is natural for an adopted person to wonder about his or her biological roots. Expressing her wonderment in a story is a safe way to do so, as stories are something that both she and A.J. can always relate to together.

## A.J.'s handshake to Maya

After Maya places as a runner-up in her county's short story competition with "A Trip to the Beach", she thinks A.J. is disappointed in her for not winning. However, not only does A.J. go into a monologue rant about why Maya should have won and the fact that award-winning stories are not often high-quality stories, she understands that A.J. is disappointed in the process of the competition, not in her. What ultimately convinces her of his pride is the handshake instead of a hug he gives her when they get home from the competition. The handshake symbolizes A.J.'s perception of Maya as a writer, a perception that encourages Maya to finally consider herself a writer.

## Maya's backpack hidden in Ismay's closet

In chapter 10, Lambiase finds a child's backpack with "Maya" written on the front hidden in Ismay's closet. Inside the backpack, he finds "Tamerlane" with a colored-on cover. As a cop, Lambiase is tempted to immediately investigate and solve the decade-old mystery. However, because he cares for and trusts Ismay, he does not question her but rather lets her tell him in his own time why she has Maya's backpack and "Tamerlane" hidden in her closet. For the reader, both objects represent secrecy, one of the themes of the novel. For Ismay, both objects are a way for her to hold on to her guilt for how she treated Marian Wallace.

## E-reader gift from A.J.'s mom

The Christmas before A.J. is diagnosed with cancer, his mom visits and gifts to A.J., Amelia, and Maya each an e-reader. A.J. reacts in anger, stating that he and his family do not need e-readers, as e-readers are the reason that his shop will eventually go out of business. Again, A.J. expresses his dislike for change, especially when that change



involves a technology that could potentially ruin what he sees to be the most meaningful, personal aspect of life: books. Ironically, when A.J. is sick and progressively dying, the e-reader is what he uses to read, as he has trouble properly seeing words on paper books. As his abilities are declining so rapidly and he approaches death, he is forced to use an electronic device that symbolizes forward progress but to him symbolizes the death of what he has spent most of his adult life building.

## **Chief's Choice Book Club**

The Chief's Choice Book Club was started and is facilitated by Chief Lambiase. Its members consist of law enforcement officers from various departments, and the books they read tend to focus on crime and police-related stories. The book club is a tangible representation of how Lambiase has created for himself the life that he wants: he has good friends, he has learned to be a better reader who can talk about and relate to books, and he has fallen in love with a woman whom he considers to be his partner for the rest of his life.

## **Selling "Tamerlane"**

A.J. sells "Tamerlane" at an auction. It does not go for the full price he had originally intended when he found it at a garage sale more than 10 years prior, but it is enough to cover the surgery and the first round of radiation. Aside from the physical release of "Tamerlane" from his possession, the selling of the book represents great change, as well as parting with loved and rare things. A.J. is about to undergo a serious surgery and an intense round of lonely radiation, after which he will live for about a year and then pass away. A.J. has to say goodbye to Amelia and Maya, and vice versa, and his parting with "Tamerlane" is just the beginning of his parting with the things he loves.

# Settings

## Island Books

Island Books is the main setting in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." A.J. purchased the storefront with his late wife Nic and made it into Alice Island's only bookstore. Most of the novel takes place in the bookstore, as it is A.J.'s pride and joy, as well as his residence in the beginning of the novel. A.J. is intent on stocking only books that he prefers, but he knows he has to stock a few other varieties in order to make enough money to keep his bookstore open. It is because of the bookstore that A.J. meets Maya, since she is dropped off there by a mother who wants her daughter to grow up to be a reader, and Amelia, since Amelia visits Island Books as a publisher sales representative. Island Books is Maya's favorite place until she's a teenager and believes the place to be too small for the three of them (her, A.J., and Amelia).

After A.J.'s death, Chief Lambiase and Ismay purchase it and keep it as a bookstore, since it is the only bookstore on Alice Island. Community members and tourists seem to appreciate its presence, and the store's visitors are as much a part of the store as the books.

## Hospital on Alice Island

The hospital on Alice Island is not in the novel too often, but there are significant scenes that take place there. For example, A.J. goes to the hospital toward the beginning of the novel for an absence seizure after Tamerlane is stolen. Later, A.J. visits Ismay after her latest miscarriage. A.J. offers to bring her home, but she chooses to stay at the hospital so she doesn't have to be alone (her husband Daniel has just left for Hollywood). The hospital is also where the reader meets Dr. Rosen, who will later diagnose A.J. with Glioblastoma multiforme. Finally, A.J. is back to the hospital toward the end of the novel for his surgery to hopefully remove the tumor and then for a month-long round of radiation. The hospital is not described except for a little bit by Amelia, who says it's grey and the art is the worst one has ever seen.

## Pequod's

Pequod's is the second-nicest restaurant on Alice Island. It is a seafood establishment with a Moby Dick theme. A.J. brings Amelia there for their first unofficial date where the two bond over literary references and a flowing conversation. A.J. decided on Pequod's because he didn't think the most expensive restaurant on the island would have been appropriate for Amelia. The restaurant has a whale suspended from the ceiling, and harpoons, nets, and raincoats hanging from the walls, as well as themed cocktails, all of which strike A.J. as extremely touristy. Amelia dislikes Moby Dick so much that she jokes about almost having faked a seafood allergy to get out of eating there.



## Portsmouth and Providence, Rhode Island

Amelia lives in Providence, Rhode Island. When A.J. begins to have romantic feelings for her, he doesn't want to wait in between Knightley Press visits to see her again. So, A.J. pretenses that he and Maya are going to Portsmouth, Rhode Island, to visit the animal topiaries, and since they're so close why don't they stop by Amelia's to see her. Lambiase goes along with A.J. and Maya, mainly so he can watch Maya and A.J. can go to visit Amelia by himself. It is during their visit that A.J. and Amelia first become intimate romantically and start being a couple.

## Daniel and Ismay's SUV

Daniel and Ismay's SUV is only in one scene, but it is an important one. The couple is on their way home from A.J. and Amelia's wedding, and it is on their way home that Ismay decides to finally stand up for herself and tell Daniel that she doesn't love him, and that she knows Maya is his biological daughter. Ismay stops the SUV in the middle of her lane, causing the vehicle to get hit from behind as well as from the side, an accident that ends up killing Daniel.

## The beach

"The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" takes place on Alice Island, a fictional island near Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The beach is not a major setting in the novel, as the characters' interests and work is more book-oriented and rarely brings them outside for recreation. However, the beach is where Marian Wallace, Maya's mom, washes up on shore after ending her own life. It is also where Ismay almost ends her life, in water colder than she expects, but Lambiase stops her by way of casual conversation.



# Themes and Motifs

## Learning to love

Learning to love others is one of the major themes in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." At the beginning of the novel, the main characters are fairly isolated from intimate relationships: A.J. is a widower who acts like he wishes to be alone the rest of his life; Maya is ignored by her biological father and abandoned by her biological mother; Amelia would rather be alone than in bad company; Ismay is in a loveless marriage full of betrayal; and Lambiase is divorced and longs for connection and companionship.

For some of these characters, such as Maya and Lambiase, learning to love other people comes naturally. Maya quickly accepts A.J. as her father, loving and trusting him immediately upon their meeting. She also takes to Lambiase as well as Amelia. Despite having been abandoned, which could create a host of emotional attachment concerns, Maya is a young girl who likes to be alone because she likes to read, but she also has no trouble spending time with the people in her immediate circle. Lambiase has a similar personality. He is divorced, but he misses the company more than he misses his wife. He takes well to people who are in his immediate circle, and he easily cares for A.J., Maya, and eventually Ismay. Part of Lambiase's lesson in learning to love other people is waiting the appropriate amount of time after Daniel has passed to indicate to Ismay (and to A.J.) that he is interested in Ismay. Then, after they become a couple, he is faithfully hers, and the end of the novel indicates that the two stay together for the rest of their days.

For A.J., being open to loving other people does not come as naturally. He is not so much afraid of his feelings as he is unsure of how to go about expressing them. After losing his wife, Nic, to a car accident and then losing his most monetarily valuable book, A.J. acts like nothing matters; he can die alone and it wouldn't matter. He likes being alone because he doesn't think he wants or needs anyone since it can't be Nic, but he laments the frustrations of being alone, such as having nobody to talk to and having to clean up all of his own messes. When Maya is put in his care, he behaves as though it's a natural step for him to care for a toddler who has been abandoned. It is possible that he relates to her plight, since he may feel abandoned by his wife's death. Regardless the motive behind his care for Maya, A.J. takes the responsibility of father up immediately, offering to adopt her instead of letting her be placed with another family. A.J. seems to strongly sense that he should adopt Maya as his daughter.

With Amelia, however, it is quite different. Since A.J. first meets Amelia during a desperate, lonely time in his life, he is not ready to care about her any farther than professionally. After caring for Maya for four years, however, his heart has softened and he has learned how having other people in his life who care for him and for whom he can care makes his life better, not worse. The same principle applies to A.J. accepting Lambiase as his closest friend.



Though Ismay's story is not told to the detail that A.J.'s is, the reader can see how she spends her years learning to love others. In her marriage to Daniel, Ismay has resigned herself to feeling worthless, old, and unattractive. After his death, though, she doesn't immediately date or look for a companion. Eventually she does accept Lambiase's invitation to go on a date, which evolves into a relationship. She reveals secrets to him that she has kept to herself for years, but she can only do that after having healed from her relationship with Daniel and learning to trust another person as intimately as she trusts Lambiase. Though she's held a friendship with A.J. in the years following her sister Nic's death, she didn't have the close companionship for which she longed until she accepted Lambiase's invitation.

## Friendship

Friendship is a strong theme in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," and it mostly plays out between Lambiase and A.J. Most of the members of the Alice Island community are A.J.'s patrons, but nobody he does not really consider anyone a close friend. Daniel and Ismay are his brother- and sister-in-law. Although A.J. is friends with each of them, there is a distance with Ismay since she was Nic's sister and a distance with Daniel because he is not a likeable man. A.J. seems to have them in his life, at the beginning of the novel, anyway, more out of obligation than a true desire to have a deep, meaningful friendship with either of them. Out of the two, A.J. treats Ismay as though he wants her around more than Daniel, simply by the way A.J. cares for Ismay when she's in the hospital and seems irritated by the way Daniel treats her.

A.J. and Lambiase slowly form a friendship after "Tamerlane" is stolen. Lambiase was the police officer present when Nic died, and at that point he and A.J. did not know each other. In that interaction, A.J. was distraught over having just lost Nic and Lambiase had tried to be a calming voice of reason. Now, almost two years later, A.J. walks into the police station to report "Tamerlane" missing, and Lambiase is the cop on duty. Lambiase recognizes A.J., but A.J. doesn't give any indication that he recognizes Lambiase. Though Alice Island is a small community, Lambiase being present for the two most significant losses of A.J.'s adult life is meaningful. In the coming month Lambiase spends more and more time with A.J, especially after Maya is left at the bookstore and A.J. adopts her. The two learn from each other, and their friendship grows throughout the novel. The reader can see that each is the other's best friend with both sharing a love of books. A.J. has always been an avid book reader and Lambiase becomes more of a reader as the novel goes on. Lambiase comes to love books because he enjoys being around A.J. and Maya, both of whom he considers to be serious book people. Lambiase likes the way it feels to be around book people and he likes what they encourage within himself.

The friendship between Amelia and A.J. is important to pay attention to, as well. The reader sees only a small portion of their friendship because Amelia's quarterly visits to Island Books are not shown in detail until A.J.'s romantic interest in her takes center place. Their professional relationship is described as A.J. contemplates caring for her beyond the relationship they've established. Amelia has been kind to both him and



Maya in all of her visits, and she shows a genuine interest in Maya's health when A.J. tells her that Maya's been sick. Though it takes Amelia a little longer to show romantic interest in A.J. than he does her, the reader can see the foundation being laid as A.J. describes the dozen visits between their first meeting and his visit to Rhode Island.

## Community

The theme of *Community* is similar to that of friendship in that one's community provides comfort and companionship throughout both easy and difficult times. However, in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," A.J.'s friends are few, but his community is wide. As the owner of the only bookstore on Alice Island, his island community clearly supports him and his business, or else A.J. would not have been able to stay in business for as long as he has. This is a contemporary novel, and many major bookstores face modern competing online stores and e-readers. Some of these big bookstores are closing for lack of significant profit, and the small bookstores is that much more vulnerable to the same fate. Yet the Alice Island community continues to buy from A.J.

The Alice Island community also shows up in certain but specific groups of people. A.J. considers the well-meaning townie to be a specific type of community member, since they give him suggestions on a regular basis of how to increase his sales. The Alice Island community also includes the Alice Island mothers, who make themselves known after Maya lands in A.J.'s hands. The mothers make sure he knows how to do what, and they are likely masking their intense curiosity of A.J.'s parenting skills with concern for Maya's well-being. Whether it's more curiosity than caring or vice-versa, the Alice Island community makes itself known in A.J.'s bookstore.

Another aspect of *Community* present in this novel is Chief Lambiase's book club he starts at Island Books, Chief's Choice Book Club. A small number of law-enforcement agents come together for Lambiase's book club, showing a community of people who have more than one similar interest. The characters are not discussed in detail, nor do they have strong roles in the story, but they are a part of Lambiase's professional and now leisure community, as well as the greater Alice Island community. It is important for the reader to notice that though it's a small-town island, the sense of *Community* is large and those who have a place in that community seem to prefer it just that way.

## Secrecy

Secrecy is a theme that does not reveal itself later in the novel. However, it can still be considered a major theme because of the ripple effects the secrets have on A.J. and the other characters. It is not until A.J.'s book blurbs, known to the reader as the chapter intros, begin talking about story twists that characters' secrets start coming out. Also, the information that the reader might think would be a secret, is not, for example, Daniel's regular affairs. Daniel Parish cheats on his wife Ismay, A.J.'s sister-in-law, regularly. The entire community including Ismay knows about his infidelity. It is not a secret, especially





since he makes no effort to hide it. However, it is one of his indiscretions that sets off a chain of secrets.

One of the first secrets the reader must deal with not knowing about is the mystery of Marian Wallace. The mystery of Marian Wallace starts when Maya is dropped off at just over two years old and is not revealed until she is approximately eight years old. Maya's place in the story is revealed by Ismay later in the novel, as Ismay confronts Daniel that he is Maya's biological father, since he got Marian Wallace pregnant. The author does not indicate that A.J. knows that Maya is Daniel's biological child; if he does know, he doesn't care. The author foreshadows the secret when she writes that Maya doesn't take very well to Ismay but does warm up to Daniel. Without knowing it, Maya has an attachment to her biological father and is emotionally distant from the woman who is upset by her existence.

After Ismay and Lambiase are dating, the reader finds out another secret related to Maya: Ismay knew about her from the beginning, since Marian Wallace had come to visit her in an effort to find Daniel and ask for some money. Ismay also reveals that she has been the one hiding "Tamerlane." She had offered it to Marian Wallace, but Marian had trouble selling it. At their last visit to Ismay's house, Maya had left her backpack and had colored all over "Tamerlane." Ismay has been hiding "Tamerlane" in her closet, in Maya's childhood backpack, for more than ten years by the time her secret is revealed. Since "Tamerlane" is returned to A.J. without so much as a note, the secret stays with Ismay and Lambiase.

Each of these secrets relates to Maya, yet Maya is unaware of them both. She is protected from the secrets by people who want to protect themselves as well as the other people whom they love. They also know that divulging certain information to Maya would likely upset her, as well as cause unnecessary stress for her. Maya seems content with her life and with the fact that A.J. is her father; she makes no indication of needing to know her biological father or even more about her biological mother. Therefore, she is unaffected by the secrets those around her carry.

## Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a theme in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." It mainly pertains to A.J., the way he relates to others, and the way he decides to live his life. The first instance of vulnerability is the way A.J. leaves his bookstore--the place that holds all of his earthly treasures--unlocked. After "Tamerlane" is stolen one night when he is passed out drunk, he goes on thinking that nothing inside the building is worth keeping locked up. So, he leaves himself vulnerable to additional theft. A.J. doesn't seem to think about it like that, though. All A.J. can see is what's already been taken from his life--Nic and "Tamerlane"--and that there is nothing else he needs to protect. In doing that, however, A.J. is left Maya, a toddler who needs to be cared for since her mother abandoned her. In leaving himself vulnerable to material theft, A.J. has gained a daughter.





Next, by adopting Maya, A.J. makes himself vulnerable to the wealth of emotions and experiences that come with being a parent. He gets less sleep and must learn how to care for a toddler and how to raise a young girl. He must learn to not be selfish with his time or his resources. The way that A.J. quickly embraces Maya as his daughter suggests that subconsciously he's been ready for that kind of emotional vulnerability, likely since his wife died about two years prior.

The vulnerability A.J. displays with Maya prepares him to be vulnerable with Amelia. A.J. has not dated since before he and his late wife got married, and he now practices his flirting and his attempts to court a woman. He makes himself vulnerable to rejection, which is exactly what he experiences when he begins pursuing Amelia. He lays the idea of dating her to rest until he realizes that she is no longer engaged. Then, because he has learned to care for other people and knows that he wants Amelia in his life, he boldly travels to Rhode Island under the pretense of seeing the topiaries for Maya, while really going to see Amelia in person since she couldn't make their quarterly book sales meeting. He makes himself vulnerable once again to her rejection, but cares enough about her that it's worth the risk.

A.J.'s learned sense of vulnerability has paid off, as he adores his wife and his daughter immensely. He has transformed from a lonely man who wishes himself dead to a man who knows he's never been happier than when he sees his wife and daughter happily interacting in his bookstore. Unfortunately, the last time A.J. makes himself vulnerable is for an unfortunate circumstance: he has cancer and must sell "Tamerlane" in order to undergo surgery. Having surgery puts one in a vulnerable state, since the patient is at the mercy of the doctors performing the operation. Yet, perhaps since his other decisions to overcome his vulnerability have paid off, A.J. hopes this one will, too.

## Quick Decision-Making

Quick Decision-Making is a theme that shows itself in a variety of ways throughout "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." Making choices is a part of any novel, as the characters must decide which courses of action they will take in order to determine their desired outcome. However, in this novel, it's important that the reader pay attention to the fact that the characters are not the type to draw out their decisions; in this story, decisions are made quickly and with a kind of firm self-awareness of what each character likes, doesn't like, wants, and doesn't want.

The first example of quick decision-making is A.J.'s speedy acceptance of Maya as his daughter. She is left in his bookstore, and he takes on the role of being her father almost immediately. He cares for her without question, but rather calls his sister-in-law to inquire of how to feed the baby. And when the social worker tells him that the proper procedure is placing her with a foster home and then with an adopted family, A.J. decides seemingly on the spot that he'd like to adopt her. He knows at this point that he enjoys the company, and he seems to enjoy having a living being to care for, not just a bookstore. The decision to adopt is typically one that is deliberate and entirely intentional. For A.J., however, it was quick and painless.



Ismay is a character whose quick decisions also have life-long impacts. First, her decision to take "Tamerlane," which she says she did without really thinking about it, set A.J.'s entire storyline with Maya in motion since it was because the door was unlocked that Marian could leave Maya in Island Books. Years later, Ismay displays her quick decision-making when during an intense conversation with Daniel she keeps her vehicle parked on the side of the road, knowing that it might get hit. Just hours earlier she had decided to end her own life, so while death may have been on her mind for some time, the idea of Daniel being gone was a split-second death, as she realized that she wanted him gone more than she wished herself dead. The car accident that killed Daniel is not presented as murder, nor is it treated as such in Ismay's mind, but it was a quick decision of apathy for Ismay to make no effort to move the vehicle out of danger. Daniel's death sets Ismay free and allows her to live a life she better enjoys.

The rest of the major decisions throughout the novel--A.J. and Amelia's decision to marry, Amelia's decision to sell Island Books, Lambiase and Ismay's decision to buy Island Books, A.J.'s decision to have surgery in an attempt to heal his body of cancer, and even Lambiase's decision to become an avid book-reader--are all well thought-out and deliberated over more. Yet it is the quick decisions that have the longest-lasting impact for the book's characters.

## Love of books

The four main characters in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry"--A.J., Maya, Amelia, and Lambiase--are all book lovers. Lambiase is a learned book-lover, meaning he comes to the point of loving books and stories after spending most of his off-duty time with A.J. and Maya. A.J., Maya, and Amelia are born book-lovers. Part of the love story of this novel is the love these characters have for the books they read.

The reader can first see this when meeting Amelia in chapter 1. As a sales rep for book publisher Knightley Press, Amelia makes her passion for books known immediately. She is adamant to not inaccurately pitch anything on each quarterly list. Amelia also highly encourages her favorite titles to her clients. She also prefers the underdog titles, the ones that don't have the best commercial chance to make it into the bookstores. This indicates that Amelia loves stories, period. She doesn't need the best-seller lists in order to find a good story; she just appreciates a well-written narrative. Later in the novel the reader finds out that she does not like "Moby Dick," though not for story purposes but because teenagers are forced to read it for school and some who find it too long and off-putting come to dislike reading and literature, something for which she has a passion. Amelia makes it clear her belief that young people would better enjoy reading were they not forced to read older classics that are difficult for them to relate to.

A.J. and Maya are similar in their love of books. Both would rather spend time with a book in their hand instead of engaging in conversation with other people. A.J. has a long list of the kinds of books he does not like. The books he likes mainly fall under one category: literary. A.J.'s love for books is evident throughout the novel, but especially at the beginning of each chapter, each one being a slight commentary on a book. He is



writing the commentary/thoughts related to each book for Maya. People do not take time to write the kind of commentary and notes that A.J. writes unless they have a distinct love for the literature, which A.J. has. Another indication of A.J.'s love for books is his displeasure in carrying anything non-literary, yet his acquiescence to doing so, knowing that he needs certain titles in order to make enough money to keep his business afloat. He loves literature to the point of wanting all of his customers to experience great literature, but he also wants to be able to continue selling books to his customers, and he knows that some of his customers will appreciate what he considers to be shallow and nonsensical book titles.

Maya's love for books is evident at a young age. When she is just a young child, she likes to read at least seven books a day, which she laments is not enough given customer interruptions. She also prefers the bookstore to anywhere else on the island, and when she is young says good morning to the books, as well as other elements of the store, each morning. Her love of books moves to a love of writing, as she enrolls in a creative writing class in high school. When she is stuck on a writing assignment, A.J. gives her a list of books that may help her get past her writer's block, and even as a teenager she greets the books when she goes browsing through the shelves looking for the books A.J. suggests. Maya's love for books could have been a way for her to connect with A.J., and being around readers and becoming a voracious reader were among her mother's wishes upon leaving her in Island Books. However, the love Maya shows for books, literature, and writing seems to be a natural character trait that happens to match her adoptive father's.

Each of these characters and the way they care for books--the way they consider stories to be a part of them and their lives--is intended to be infectious to their customers. Lambiase is impacted by their love of reading and the character traits that their love of reading have brought about. Lambiase likes being around readers because he thinks they are a special group of people, and while he doesn't think he can be like A.J. or Maya because they are born-readers and he is not, Lambiase likes the way their love of and passion for books and narratives influence him and eventually lead him to start his own book club and ultimately take over the store.

## Home

Home is a theme in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" that is not obvious to the reader, yet is present throughout the story. A.J. owns Island Books on Alice Island because Alice Island was his late wife's hometown and it was lacking a bookstore. He made his home on the island because of his wife, yet she has passed away. At the beginning of the novel, the only personal connection A.J. has to Alice Island is his bookstore. However, A.J. states at one point that there is nothing more personal than books, so his bookstore is extremely personal to him. It is also his physical home, as he lives in a small apartment above the storefront. He is comfortable on Alice Island, knows the community, and doesn't like change. His home before Alice Island isn't mentioned or described, so the reader can assume that Alice Island is the strongest tie of a home that A.J. has ever had.



A perspective on the concept of "Home" is also offered through Amelia. She lives in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, but travels so much for her work that moving from there to Alice Island doesn't put an emotional strain on her. What is important to note, however, is that her home as described when A.J. Skypes and visits her is full of her personality. However, when she moves to Alice Island to marry/live with A.J., she gives no indication that not having her personality-infused home bothers her. Amelia is more concerned with spending her time with A.J., having a relationship with Maya, and traveling for her job than she is the physical contents of her home. The reader finds out after one of Maya's moody teenage outbursts that A.J. and Amelia have been looking to purchase a home since they got married several years prior, but nothing had ever suited them. This indicates that the two of them care more about their proximity to each other than the four walls which house them.

Another perspective on home comes from Lambiase. He is divorced, but the narrator states that he misses having something to go home to. Thus, he finds a home with A.J. and Maya. He finds a place within their family, becomes an avid reader, and takes on their world as his own. Though he continues to live by himself, he finds a "home" with A.J. and Maya in their world of books. Later in the story, he finds a home in his relationship with Ismay. Since he and Ismay decide at the end of the novel to purchase Island Books, the reader can assume that the two stay together permanently and enjoy life together for the rest of their days.

## Death brings new life

Death is one of the themes in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," and each death seems to bring about a new life of some sort. The first character to have died who the readers learn about is A.J.'s late wife Nic. She is only present in the novel in one ghost-dream scene and then in references from her family and friends, but her passing seems to have made A.J. into the obstinate, cranky person that he is at the beginning of the novel. She died in a car accident while bringing an author to the airport after an author event. Though her death seems to take away part of A.J.'s heart and his ability to enjoy life, the event also gives way to the life he eventually creates, a life in which he is admittedly happier than he's ever been.

The next character to die is Marian Wallace, who passes away a few days after she abandons Maya at Island Books. Her body washes up on the shore of Alice Island. Not much is known about Marian Wallace, and the most speculation the reader gets is in Maya's short story she writes for her high school Creative Writing class more than a decade after Marian's death. However, Marian's death is the beginning of Maya's life with A.J. Even though he insists he can't properly care for her, it does not take A.J. more than a weekend to decide that he'd like to adopt her. Marian's death gave both Maya and A.J. a better chance at a meaningful life, as the two took to each other and built a solid father-daughter relationship that neither one of them would have likely had otherwise.



The third character to die is Daniel, an author and Ismay's adulterous husband. Daniel is not written as a well-liked character. Even A.J. seems to dislike him and only spend time with him out of obligation of being brothers-in-law. When Daniel dies in the car accident, Ismay is freed from her life with him. She was miserable and felt trapped, unworthy of ever being good or loved again. Once again, someone's death brings about a new life for someone else. Ismay is free to find a new life and a new love without the constraints of a man who cheated on her regularly and without the pressure to conceive a child.

The novel concludes with A.J.'s death. Being the main character, his death may be the hardest for the reader. However, A.J. is clear throughout the novel that he sees his life as a narrative, and every narrative must end at some point. His death is a new beginning for Amelia and Maya, as Amelia leaves Knightley Press and Maya is about to graduate high school. His death is also a new beginning for Ismay and Lambiase, since they take over the bookstore and create an entirely new identity for Island Books. While they keep some of the literary fiction A.J. insisted on shelving, they also keep more of the bestsellers than A.J. ever did and focus more on sales than on personal taste. Though A.J.'s death is devastating for his friends and family, it also brings about some much-needed changes for some of the characters.

## Loneliness and loneliness cured

Loneliness is a theme for almost every character in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry". So much so, that it takes more than just the companionship of another person to ease the loneliness of the characters. For A.J., his loneliness began about 22 months before the novel begins when his wife, Nic, died in a car accident. Since then, he has been in a downward spiral of loneliness that culminates with him passing out drunk and having his rarest, most prized book stolen in the meantime. A.J. has used his bookstore and his love of books to ease the loneliness, but he knows that he very well may live the rest of his life that way. Maya's appearance eases his loneliness somewhat, as he finds new purpose in caring for someone who is completely dependent on him. However, he has resigned to be content with living alone with his books and raising his daughter, but only until he starts to develop feelings for Amelia. Once he and Amelia begin a romantic relationship, A.J.'s loneliness is eased and he is happier than he's ever been.

Amelia, in her 30s, has never been married, and has been pressured by her mother to find a companion. She would like to marry and find someone with whom she shares sensibilities, as A.J. calls it when two people have things in common. However, she goes through a series of unsuccessful dates and romantic partners. It isn't until A.J. comes to visit her in Rhode Island that her loneliness is eased. Unfortunately, it likely returns after A.J.'s death, but at least she has Maya to care for.

Lambiase is a character who is presented as not being necessarily lonely, but rather just enjoys companionship more than solitude. However, the fact that he doesn't like to go home after work because there is nobody there to greet him and spend time with him and so goes to the bookstore to spend time with Maya and A.J. suggests that when he



goes home his loneliness is real. Unlike A.J. and Amelia who cure their loneliness mainly in romantic relationships, Lambiase cures his by spending most of his off-duty time with Maya and A.J. He learns to love reading, he takes on an uncle-type role for Maya, and he even starts a book club with other law enforcement officers. Lambiase does eventually form a romantic relationship with Ismay, but he seems to have cured his loneliness long before they begin dating.

Ismay, on the other hand, seems to release her loneliness once Daniel is gone. Ismay seems to be the loneliest while she is married to Daniel, since he regularly cheats on her, does not support her when she has a miscarriage and is in the hospital, and because she cannot carry a child without losing it to a miscarriage. While she is married, Ismay sees no light at the end of her loneliness tunnel. When he dies, however, she seems lighter and happier than at any other point in the novel. Then, when she and Lambiase get together, she seems even happier, thankful for the trusted companionship and the kind, loving way in which Lambiase treats her.

For Maya, her loneliness is less obvious and less touched on by the author. Her loneliness seems to be only one layer of her persona, and it's one that exists only out of obligation since she was abandoned by her biological mother. As a toddler, Maya takes to A.J. right away, trusting him implicitly and calling him "Daddy" within days of his caring for her. As she grows older, Maya does not think of her mother often, she has a strong relationship with A.J., and she loves living in such close proximity to a bookstore. Thus, her loneliness seems to be loneliness that she may feel obligated to feel having been orphaned at such a young age. Otherwise, Maya does not express the same kind of loneliness as the other main characters in the novel.



# Styles

## Point of View

"The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" is written from a third-person omniscient narrator's point of view. Each character's thoughts and sensibilities are described, as the narrator can be in each character's head and does not have to guess what one is feeling based on outward actions and expressions. For the reader, this allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the story. When the reader can know the inner thoughts and thought processes of each character, their outward actions and expressions tend to make a lot more sense, giving the story fuller meaning and understanding. A.J. makes it clear that he sees his life as a story, one long narrative punctuated by characters and events and specific plot points. The omniscient narrator's point of view lets the reader know all of A.J.'s story.

The tone of the novel suggests that the author wants the reader to understand fully A.J.'s storied life, which is easier to do if the reader can deeply understand each character. The title says what the author is going for: she wants the reader to understand that A.J.'s life is to be looked at as a story. In every story there is a beginning, middle, and end. There are characters and events both happy and sad. There are plot twists and there are surprises. Each of those elements is present in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," and not just that, but the elements are pointed out by A.J. as he watches his story unfold.

## Language and Meaning

"The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" is written in episodic snippets. That is, one chapter does not flow immediately into the next as a typical novel. Instead, the chapters are written more as short stories. A.J.'s favorite kind of book is a collection of short stories that, when strung together, create the storied life of A.J. Fikry. Despite what might seem an unnatural flow, the reader can still gain a complete understanding of the narrative as each chapter seeks to reveal more and more of A.J.'s story, sometimes as it relates to himself and sometimes as it relates to his family members and/or friends.

Since the characters in the story are not overly sentimental, the language throughout the novel is similar. There are not overly romantic descriptions of either the people, scenery, or events. There are few descriptors, analogies, and metaphors when something needs to be described, but the feelings of the characters are straightforward. Similarly, some of the events that may be considered major are summarized rather than described in detail. For example, A.J. and Amelia's wedding is summarized, as is A.J.'s funeral. Instead, Maya's short story contest, the car accident that kills Daniel, and A.J.'s visit to Rhode Island are all described in detail. The author seems to be trying to convey that while life's major events are important, it is the smaller moments and events that make up one's life story.



The author also uses literature inside of her novel to make her points throughout the novel. For example, A.J. gives a long list of the type of literature he's not interested in, letting the reader know right off the bat that he is a picky and peculiar character. She uses stories as the basis of A.J. and Amelia's relationship, as well as Lambiase's self-evolution. And mostly, "Tamerlane," a classic and rare collection of poems by Edgar Allan Poe, is a significant object in the novel, as its disappearance changes A.J.'s life into something he never could have or would have imagined for himself.

## Structure

"The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" is split up into 13 chapters that read separately as short stories and together as a collection of short stories that makes up one large narrative. Each chapter is named as is the title of a book, and each book used as the theme of the chapter is one that A.J. feels is important enough to leave notes about for Maya. It isn't until toward the end of the novel that the reader learns that the chapter intros are a collection of book notes A.J. is leaving Maya because he is dying. Yet, after finding out that this is the intention behind each chapter introduction, the reader can review the text and see that in fact each intro is written with a tone of finality and lessons learned. The reader knows that there is significance to each chapter intro, and in fact each chapter intro gives abstract insight into its chapter, but no details are given until the chapter is read. Since A.J. writes the book notes with a specific audience and purpose in mind, he knows why he's writing them. The reader, however, does not discover that reason until nearly the conclusion of the novel.

The chapters all vary in length, which matches the literary tone of the characters, as they all know that some stories are longer or shorter than others. When there is more to a story, the chapter is longer, such as the chapter when A.J. finds and subsequently adopts Maya. When there is less, such as when Maya is just a young girl and is purely thinking about the bookstore and how much she loves A.J., the chapter is shorter. This matches A.J.'s personality, as he is such a reader that knows when a story should stop and when it should go on.





## Quotes

No Man Is an Island; Every Book Is a World.

-- Sign above Island Books (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 8, paragraph 7)

**Importance:** This quote is part of the facade for Island Books, the bookstore owned by A.J. Fikry and which serves as the setting of most of "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry." The quote sets the tone for the novel, since the love of books is a major theme throughout the novel, and a major sentiment of its characters. What's ironic about the quote, however, is A.J. is so incredibly particular about the books he holds in his store and the people he lets into his life, that he sometimes acts as though he wishes he were an island, an island where he wouldn't have to deal with other people and he could read only the books that he prefers. The quote also matches the geographic setting of the novel, which is Alice Island, an island near Cape Code and Boston.

How about I tell you what I don't like?

-- A.J. (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 13, paragraph 5)

**Importance:** In his first meeting with Amelia, A.J. is rude and dismissive. His list of things he doesn't like is exhaustive. He is not afraid to say what he does not want in his store, nor is he in any way bashful about how particular he is about his inventory. A.J.'s attitude at this point in the novel is indicative of his dislike for change, his loneliness, his tiredness at being alone, and his overall ornery demeanor. Amelia has just introduced herself as the new sales rep from Knightley Press, and although A.J. didn't know her predecessor Harvey Rhodes very well, A.J. preferred him because he knew what to expect with Harvey. With Amelia, A.J. has no idea what to expect. The reader can tell in his tone that he is annoyed at having to give the list of what he doesn't like. Harvey being gone is just one more thing that bothers A.J., and as Amelia is not only Harvey's replacement but the one to break the news to A.J., she receives the brunt of A.J.'s frustration.

They had only ever discussed books, but what, in this life, is more personal than books?

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 18, paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote continues to set up the novel. The literary world of books is the world in which A.J. and his people live. A.J. sees every situation, including his entire life, as a storyline. Everything A.J. observes and/or experiences can be related to a story and/or made into a narrative. He has invested his life in books and therefore believes them to be the basis of everything in life that is important.

The difficulty of living alone is that any mess he makes he is forced to clean up himself. No, the real difficulty of living alone is that no one cares if you are upset.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 19, paragraphs 4-5)

**Importance:** One aspect of A.J.'s character at the beginning of the novel is that although he acts as though he prefers life alone, he is obviously quite lonely. Since the



narrator is a third-person omniscient narrator, all thoughts and feelings of the characters are portrayed throughout the novel, even if the words are not the character's specific thoughts or words. Therefore, the reader can see through this quote and others like it that even when A.J. acts like he would prefer to be alone, he in fact would not. The author is also setting up the community that A.J. will begin building very soon when Maya is anonymously dropped off in his store.

In the end, A.J. decides to leave his front door unlocked. In his estimation, nothing here is worth stealing.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 40, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The reader already knows that nothing is more personal to A.J. than books. At this point, "Tamerlane," the rarest book in A.J.'s collection, has been stolen. It was his most prized possession and the one book he knew he could always sell in case he ever needed a large sum of money. Also, as a bookseller, A.J. took great pride in owning one of only a handful of copies of "Tamerlane." Now that something extremely personal and valuable has been stolen from him, A.J. would see no point in locking the door. He has nobody inside to protect, and in his opinion, nothing worthy of protection, either. This also allows Marian to slip inside and leave Maya in the bookshop, changing A.J. and Maya's lives forever.

But me-also-thinks my latter-day reaction speaks to the necessity of encountering stories at precisely the right time in our lives. Remember, Maya: the things we respond to at twenty are not necessarily the same things we will respond to at forty and vice versa. This is true in books and also in life.

-- A.J. Fikry (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 41, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** There are a few points of significance in this quote. First, the fact that A.J. names "Maya" as the intended recipient of the chapter introduction. This is the first time the reader knows who A.J. might be writing the chapter intros for. The reader has not yet met Maya, but the reader knows he/she is about to. The quote also gives insight into the less-rigid side of A.J.'s personality, which is something the reader hasn't yet seen. So far, A.J. has been rigid in his reading tastes and in the people he prefers in his life. This statement lets the reader know that even though A.J. likes exactly what he likes, he is willing to admit that some stories are not enjoyed or understood until a certain point in a person's life.

Though it had occurred to him that something might be stolen, he had never considered the possibility that something might be left.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 49, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote speaks to the fact that A.J. assumes things will continue leaving his life, but that nothing meaningful will enter. The sentiment is part of A.J.'s experience of being a widower, as well as his most valued rare book being stolen. A.J. sees his current life as something that stands isolated from other people. He assumes that at this point, in his late 30s, there is nothing that could be added to his life to make it more meaningful.



At first, he thinks this is happiness, but then he determines it's love. 'Fucking love', he thinks. 'What a bother.' It's completely gotten in the way of his plan to drink himself to death, to drive his business to ruin. The most annoying thing about it is that once a person gives a shit about one thing, he finds he has to start giving a shit about everything else.

-- Narrator and A.J. (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 76, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** A.J. has just given Maya her christening party at the bookstore and he has this thought when he watches Maya enjoying the party in her pink party dress. The quote is an indication of A.J.'s self-evolution that is central to the novel. Since at first he was quite determined to live his life alone as a widower, not caring anymore about anyone or anything, Maya's presence has challenged that resolve. Since this is the beginning of his time with Maya, A.J. has not yet fully accepted the idea of caring for another person. While he readily accepted tending to Maya's physical needs, growing to love her was another story. He's lost enough love in his life that loving another person feels like a hassle, since it involves emotions and actions that he thought had been completely laid to rest when his wife passed.

Sometimes, after the customers and the employees have left, she thinks that she and A.J. are the only people in the world. No one else seems as real as he does. Other people are shoes for different seasons, nothing more. A.J. can touch the wallpaper without getting on a chair, can operate the cash register while talking on the phone, can lift heavy boxes of books over his head, uses impossibly long words, knows everything about everything. Who could compare to A.J. Fikry?

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 84, paragraph 8)

**Importance:** In chapter 4, the narrator is mostly inside of Maya's head, so the reader can gain a glimpse into her world and her way of thinking. She is young, but she is an articulate and self-aware character. She knows her mother left her, and she knows that A.J. is her permanent caretaker. She also immediately took to A.J. as her father, and since he immediately took to her as his adopted daughter, she would see him as a superhero. In her eyes, he loved and rescued her, no questions asked. Maya is safe with A.J. and because she's safe, she thinks of the man who provides the safety as a superhero. On A.J.'s end, the significance of a little girl considering him a superhero is that he is and will continue to be forced to love and care for another person, no matter how much of a hassle he thinks that loving might be. It's important for characters to see themselves through others' eyes, and though A.J. isn't there yet, the fact that Maya thinks of him as highly as she does bodes well for A.J.'s overall mood and perspective on life.

He feels naked when speaking about the things he really loves.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 92, paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Though this statement is from the narrator, the narrator acts as an omniscient being that knows the thoughts of each character. This statement is part of A.J.'s self-evolution: he is learning to be more self-aware and to experience and express love better than he has in the past. At this point, A.J. is the middle of a conversation with



Amelia about a book he read that moved him quite deeply. It was Amelia's favorite book on the Knightley Press list during her first visit about 3-4 years prior, so he knows it's a big deal to tell her how much he liked it. He's also still in the beginning-to-middle stages of being able to express positive emotions.

There's something kind of heroic about being a bookseller, and there's also something kind of heroic about adopting a child.

-- Amelia (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 101, paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Amelia says this to A.J. as they are leaving dinner at Pequod's. A.J. has started to have romantic feelings for Amelia, but Amelia is currently engaged to a soldier. Her statement as they parted ways indicates that she thinks highly of A.J., probably higher than A.J. realized. It also foreshadows their coming relationship, as it gives a clue as to how Amelia has a soft spot in her heart for A.J. The statement is also significant for A.J. to know that other people don't see him as just a crotchety bookseller. Just as with Maya's perception of him being the best person she knows, Amelia's perception of A.J.'s good character is good for A.J. and his self-concept.

All I can say is ... All I can say is we'll figure it out, I swear. When I read a book, I want you to be reading it at the same time. I want to know what would Amelia think of it. I want you to be mine. I can promise you books and conversation and all my heart, Amy.

-- A.J. (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 154, paragraph 9)

**Importance:** A.J. has always been more reserved in showing his positive emotions to the people he cares about. This part of A.J.'s marriage proposal to Amelia (Amy) is the second half; the first half are all the reasons he is a terrible match for anyone. However, he knows that he cares enough about Amelia to ask her to marry him, and when he tells her that he can offer her books, conversation, and all his heart, he is laying everything on the line. The reader is familiar with the fact that A.J. believes books are the most personal thing two people could discuss, and so of course he would include them in his marriage proposal. A.J. also refers to Amelia as Amy, which is a rare occurrence, and therefore it speaks to the reverence of the moment.

She thinks about driving them both off the road and into the ocean, and the thought makes her happy, happier than she would have been if she'd only killed herself. She realizes in that moment that she doesn't want to be dead. She wants Daniel to be dead. Or at least gone. Yes, gone. She'd settled for gone.

-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 167, paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Self-evolution is one of the themes in "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry," and it does not only apply to the main character. Ismay is A.J.'s sister-in-law from his marriage to Nic, and she has struggled for many years with miscarriages and an adulterous husband. Until now, Ismay has not believed herself worthy of any better than a lying, cheating husband. This statement shows that she has reached her breaking point of characterizing herself as a bad person, and she has reached her final tolerance level for being married to a man whom she does not love. This awareness brings a boldness for Ismay and allows her to confront Daniel about the fact that she doesn't love him, she



knows that Maya is his biological daughter, and that he is morally corrupt man. While the scenario ends in Daniel's physical death, it is an awakening and the beginning of a second chance for Ismay.

Dying father argues with daughter about the 'best' way to tell a story.  
-- A.J. (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 173, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This is the intro to Chapter 8 in A.J.'s book blurbs he's writing for Maya. In keeping with the tone of the novel, the author has nonchalantly slipped this in as a way of foreshadowing to the reader A.J.'s death. Though he and Maya don't argue about the best way to tell a story, A.J. will soon be diagnosed with a rare, terminal form of cancer. If the reader hasn't picked up on the author's style of foreshadowing, this would be a difficult clue to notice.

A sentence occurs to her: 'The day my father shook my hand, I knew I was a writer.'  
-- Narrator/Maya (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 196, paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Though Maya is a major character in the novel, little of the story is told from her perspective. In this quote, she has just received third place in a creative writing contest. From the moment Maya was left in the bookstore as a toddler, she has inherently trusted A.J. and considered him her father. Through the years of his caring for her, that sentiment has not changed one bit. Part of that trust has been taking to his literary and cerebral personality with the desire to be a writer. While the reader knows that she is biologically Daniel Parish's and may have gotten her internal desire to write from genetics, Maya sees it as coming from her adoptive father. Neither she nor A.J. are particularly affectionate, and so the handshake he gives her after defending her short story is a perfect fit for their relationship. It also means a great deal to her in terms of considering herself a writer.

The right thing for me to do is blow my stupid brains out, I'd say.  
-- A.J. (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 226, paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The quote shows A.J.'s desperation and how far his thoughts have traveled in such a short period of time since receiving his diagnosis of Glioblastoma multiforme. A.J. doesn't want to create a hassle for his wife or for his daughter, and so he thinks that disappearing in the quickest way possible would be best for everybody. However, the reader can see that his is a hyperbolic statement that is made in pure emotion and frustration, rather than logical thought.

A question I've thought about a great deal is why it is so much easier to write about the things we dislike/hate/acknowledge to be flawed than the things we love.  
-- A.J. (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 239, paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This statement is in the Chapter 12 introduction as part of a book blurb he writes to Maya. By now the reader knows that these blurbs are written to Maya in an attempt to give her some of his own thoughts on some literary pieces before he passes away. His words go back to when he realized he felt naked when trying to speak of



things he loves. At the end of the novel and at the end of his life, A.J. remains uncomfortable with distinct displays of positive emotion. However, he is trying. In the same chapter intro, he tells Maya that she and Amelia are his favorite people.

I love you,' she says with a resigned shrug. 'I want to leave you with something cleverer than that, but it's all I know.

-- Amelia (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 245, paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Amelia says this to A.J. as he is being wheeled in for surgery to hopefully remove his cancerous tumor. The significance of the quote lies in the fact that as literary-minded people, Amelia and A.J. sometimes feel that "I love you" is too simplistic to hold any real meaning. Yet, the way she ends her statement with "it's all I know" signifies that what she's feeling in her heart has taken over her literary-minded self. She and A.J. have loved each other and taken care of each other throughout their relationship, but both remained roughly the same in terms of the romantic affection they showed one another, choosing to express what they thought to be more worthy thoughts, those that were more literary and cerebral than a seemingly simple 'I love you'. Yet, when it comes to the near end of her husband's life, Amelia knows that all she can give is her heart, just as A.J. said when he proposed to her almost ten years prior.

We aren't the things we collect, acquire, read. We are, for as long as we are here, only love. The things we loved. The people we loved. And these, I think these really do live on.

-- A.J. (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 251, paragraph 5)

**Importance:** A.J.'s words are spoken, but not understood by anyone but himself, for his ability to speak has been taken by his cancer. His words show that his personality has undergone a significant transformation, as he now understands that while books are still a very personal thing, it is the people with whom one is surrounded that make a life. He not understands that it is the people whom one loves that makes up one's life, and that it's with those people that one's legacy lives on. By taking care of Maya and choosing to love and marry Amelia, A.J. made the conscious decision to change his life from what he thought it was going to be once Nic died. On his death bed, he sees that his choice was the right one.