

Westminster Abby Study Guide

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Plot Summary

"Westminster Abby" begins as Abby Capshaw is sitting in her seat on a flight to London. She is going to spend the summer in the Students Across the Seven Seas (SASS) program. She is excited to have time away from her parents, who are overprotective and restrictive. Abby's parents are sending her to London to get her away from a boy she has been interested in, but it turns out that before the trip, Abby finds out that the boy has another girl on the side. So Abby arrives in London nervous about having new experiences on her own, and also anxious to have new experiences to put heartbreak behind her. On her first morning, Abby meets Zoe, a punk rocker with green hair and a pierced tongue. Zoe takes Abby under her wing, and the two friends travel around London with other students from the SASS program. At a pub—where Abby is not drinking anything alcoholic—she meets Ian, a friendly and interested Brit. Zoe encourages her to talk to him, and soon enough, she finds herself at his house, where he has offered to cook for her. In a short time, Ian invites her to visit his parents in Manchester, and Abby lies to her parents about her trip. As soon as she returns to London, Abby finds James, who has used the ticket she bought for him. He wants to apologize and win her back, and Abby goes to Dublin with him, because she wants to see who she is with him. They have a good time there, and they kiss a few times, but in the end, Abby feels that James has lost her trust once, and while she will be friends with him, she has also found Ian, and she wants to see who she is in other places than in James' arms. Abby confesses to her parents that she had lied about her travels to Manchester and Dublin, and her parents are not that angry, because they have just gotten a glowing report from Reuben, the chaperone for the SASS program. In the end, Abby agrees not to lie to her parents, and they agree to give her more freedom and independence. Abby does not jump into Ian's arms, but she does end the book at a dance club, where she is glad that her life has Ian in it.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Abby Capshaw's application for the Students Across the Seven Seas (SASS) says that her parents convinced her to apply for a study-abroad program. She looks forward to getting away from her parents and having new experiences.

Chapter 1 begins with the airplane emergency instructions as Abby prepared to depart for London. She can't understand the captain, whose British English is unintelligible to her. The narrator says that Abby is looking for a change from "the whole 'responsible thing.'" (p. 2). She describes herself as "terminally boring" and looks forward to London as a change. Abby blames her parents for being overprotective and stifling.

Abby is confused when the flight attendant offers her biscuits, and the terminology surrounding water (fizzy or still) is also confusing to her. She has studied the British English words, to orient herself, but this does not help her in the moment. She is looking forward to "sophisticated" London events like high tea and theatre. Abby says that it is ironic that her parents, who are so controlling and demanding—expecting her to make straight-As, and keeping a tight curfew—had found this program for her, and sent her out of their reach for ten weeks. It turns out that they have done this in order to get her away from a boy named James. The narrator says that Abby has used her "prodigious babysitting savings" to buy James a plane ticket mid-way through the summer. (p. 7).

Chapter 1 Analysis

The narrative is light and ironic as the reader meets her. She is desperate to get away from her parents, although she is also terrified about the prospect of navigating a new culture all by herself. The narrator is aware of the ironies surrounding Abby's trip: that it was Abby's parents who wanted her to go—but her development as a person has put them in a tricky situation: they are giving her more liberty as a way of getting her away from the boy for whose sake she wants to have more liberty. This first chapter sets up the reader's expectation of confusing events, and conflict with parents, in the coming story.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Abby's first impression of England comes from the pale people who disembark with her and ride the shuttle into the airport. Even though they speak the same language, the narrator says that Abby could not understand a word they were saying.

Abby meets Reuben at the airport, and is relieved to hear an American accent. Reuben says that he could recognize Abby because her mother had called to describe her to him.

In the cab on the way into the city, Reuben tells Abby what she can expect from classes. He says that her mother asked him to provide weekly updates on her well-being. Abby remembers her friend Dani's suggestion that they go to a party at NYU, where Dani's brother Spencer goes to school. Abby lies to her parents and at the party, Dani and Spencer convince her to talk to a boy who likes her. She demurs, but he comes over and introduces himself: This is James.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Abby is a nervous girl, who is certain that her parents are going to punish her for any liberty she exercises—but she also seems young and inexperienced, and afraid of having experience in general. When Dani commands her to lie to her parents, Abby is amazed that they could go to the college party. When Dani's brother tells Abby that a boy is checking her out, she is flustered and doesn't know what to do. Fortunately for her, the boy comes over and introduces himself.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Abby hits her head on a shelf above her head, and has to remind herself that she is in London. She had arrived at 11 p.m. the night before, and the elevator had stuck between floors on her way to her dorm room. In the morning, she straightens up, in spite of her desire to let loose a little. At breakfast, Abby finds the food unappetizing, and she sits next to a girl with green hair and starts a conversation with her. This is Zoe is good-natured and laughs when she thinks that Abby is joking about her lactose intolerance, and she introduces herself. Abby confesses that she was nervous about coming to England, but when Zoe's eyes widen in distrust, she decides that she is not nervous at all.

At the orientation meeting, Zoe tells Abby who's who in the crowd of students. Reuben shows up and tells the students about classes, meals, and ID cards, and Zoe tells Reuben that Abby wants to know when the group will be leaving for the West End. Abby had no such question, but she makes the best of the attention Zoe places on her.

The group of students goes to Westminster on an outing, and Zoe chastises Abby for reading her guidebook. By this point, Abby has met Chrissy and Simon, fellow SASS student, who take her by the arm and lead her through the experiences she is nervous about. Zoe makes some gentle fun of Abby for being bookish, although Abby stands her ground by filling in the details about the sights they are seeing.

Abby goes to a pub in the West End with Zoe, Chrissy, Fred and Simon, but when the others order beers, she does not. The students are all "vibing on the pub," in spite of its artificiality. (p. 37).

When Abby says that she would like a beer, Simon and Fred go to get another round of drinks, and Zoe and Chrissy tell Abby that Simon is obviously "crushing on you, big-time." (p. 38). When Fred and Simon bring beers back, Abby says that she's going to have to get Fred to teach her some Portuguese. Simon says that it's time to go to dinner, and the students discuss the meaning of 'sharp dress' for the theatre. Simon tells them what it means, and he puts his hand on Abby's knee when he tells her that she looks great in what she's got on.

In an email to Abby, Dani tells Abby the news from home. She says that she has not had any news of James, and says that Spencer is apologetic for having introduced her to a jerk.

Abby emails her friend Mara in Italy (also through SASS) and tells her that England is just like in the movies. James writes to say that "it was a mistake. It will never happen again and I will make it up to you" (p. 45) but this is not a clear reference. Abby writes back three drafts of emails, ranging from friendly to dismissive, but she deletes all three.



Chapter 3 Analysis

Abby's first friend is ideal for her, much like Dani, her outgoing friend in New York. Throughout their touring around London, Abby's naiveté plays well against Zoe's exuberant outgoing personality, and Abby's bookishness allows the novel to be informative in addition to fun, including details about English history. Abby still relies on her guidebook, though, and Zoe resolves to liberate her from it by throwing the book away.

Much like Dani and Spencer at the frat party, Zoe and Chrissy try to set Abby up with Simon, the student from Ireland, but at the end of the chapter, the reader finds out that the relationship with James has not been going well, as James emails Abby to apologize.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In her British Cinema class, Abby and Zoe struggle to pay attention to the dry lecture. The class is set up with a good deal of independence for the students, unlike Abby's American classes, which are full of assignments, extra credit opportunities, and quizzes. At lunch, Zoe and Abby put vinegar on their 'chips' and complain about the food.

Abby's mother emails to say that she's glad to hear that Abby has settled in, but she asks why Abby hasn't described the library yet. "Abby should have been frustrated. Or maybe even furious. After all she was miles away and her parents were still trying to control her. But really, she felt homesick. How could she be homesick for a place where she felt so suffocated?" (p. 54). After she reads this email from her mother, Abby goes back to her room to sulk, but Zoe finds her and drags her to the hall bar. Zoe says that another girl, Melanie, had left with Simon a little earlier. In explaining why she is not too upset about Simon, Abby tells Zoe about her parents and James. She says that she was in love with James, and that her parents objected to their seeing each other. After her parents made her apply for the program, and she bought a plane ticket for James, she says that she found out he had been cheating on her with another girl—from the time they started seeing each other.

When Zoe tells Abby that she came to London to be in the center of punk rock culture, and says that she was in a band at home, she drums on her pint glass and when Abby shimmies a little, a boy introduces himself. He is Ian, and he invites Zoe and Abby to play poker with him and his mates.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter fills in the story with James, and reconciles some of the irony that was introduced in the first chapter. Abby is not exactly in exile in London, she is taking refuge from James' infidelity with another girl. Zoe is sympathetic, and it does not take long for Abby to have another admirer in Ian.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

When Zoe pulls out her glasses, Abby remarks on them, and Simon says that she must want to see Prince William if he walks by. She and Abby and Simon and Chrissy have gone to Eton for the weekend. Abby invites everyone to come with her to Windsor Castle, and Zoe says that she agrees on condition that Abby gives the book a rest for an hour or two. The next morning, on their way to class, Zoe and Abby run into Ian, who says that he has been playing cards among all boys. Zoe and Abby says that they will be at the hall bar, and he says that he will come see them.

Abby emails Dani to say that she is already three weeks into her trip, and she has been hanging out with Zoe full-time. They went to Buckingham Palace and Zoe tried to make the Beefeaters break concentration, and saw buskers in Covent Garden, and Madame Tussaud's wax museum. She says that she is not drinking beer, although she and Zoe spend a lot of time at the hall bar. She says that she has been seeing Ian a lot, but she keeps shying away from him. She does not join his poker games, or go to movies with him when he invites her.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter gives the reader more glimpses of British culture and sites, as Zoe and Abby and their fellow-students tour around for the weekends. Abby is still relying on her guidebook, but not as much as before. Ian has expressed an interest in her, but she has not opened up enough to take him up on his invitations to poker or movies. She says that she wants to "get over the James situation" but Dani notices that "you've got it bad, girl." (p. 68).



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Zoe takes Abby to Camden Town, where she criticizes Abby for being parsimonious. She gets Abby to try on thigh-high zebra-striped boots, and when Abby sees herself in them, she realizes that she is "kind of...sexy." (p. 72). Ian sees Abby in the boots—he has come to Camden Town to shop for a new remix—and Before he leaves to find his friends, he invites Zoe and Abby to come to the flat, and he compliments Abby on her boots. Instead of the boots, though, Abby ends up buying lip gloss.

That night, Abby puts her hair in pig tails (as she had worn it when she met James) and when she sees Ian, he looks "primed—Had he primed for her?" (p. 77). Ian comes over and he and Abby start to get to know each other. Abby has a hard time making conversation with Ian, but he seems undeterred. He tells her that he lives off-campus with his friends, and that they are not in the dining hall because they cook for themselves. When Abby says that she'll believe that when she sees it, she sets herself up for an invitation to dinner, and immediately feels apprehensive about going too far.

He tells her where to go, and they make a date for the next night.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This is the chapter in which Abby finally breaks from herself. At Zoe's urging, the zebra-print boots show Abby another side of herself, and fortunately Ian is there to witness it. He leaves Zoe and Abby alone to their shopping, but this piques his interest in Abby, and hers in him, so that it is only a small step to asking her out, and this seems to happen effortlessly as they talk about his cooking.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Abby writes to Dani to tell her that she is "all grown up" on account of having asked Ian to cook for her. She describes him to Dani "Tall and thin, but with some build to him, always dressed somewhere between casual and trendy." (p. 82). She shows up at his door, and thinks about fleeing, but knocks nonetheless. Ian says that he was going to try to impress Abby, and he tried to make guinea fowl, but he burnt it. Abby says that she'll try Indian food, but she tells Ian "you're in charge of the order. I'm totally in your hands." (p. 86). Abby and Ian have Indian takeaway, and put in a DVD of a movie, but conversation takes over, and Abby "was surprised by how easy it was to talk to Ian." (p. 86).

Abby tells Ian about her parents, and complains about their strictness, since she is a good student all on her own, but they treat her like she is seven, she says. Ian asks if her parents would be alright with him putting his hands on her knee, and she says that they wouldn't, "but they aren't here right now, are they?" (p. 89).

The next day, Abby is telling Zoe about her date, and she says that there was "smoochage" (p. 89). Abby's mother rings her cell phone, but Abby doesn't answer. Ian "appoints himself Abby's tour guide of London" and takes her around on weekends. They visit the Whispering Gallery, and Ian shows Abby how sound travels along the ceiling, asking her, from across the room, in a whisper, "fancy a kiss, luv?" (p. 92). Abby writes to Mara to tell her about Ian, and she says that he has invited her to Manchester to meet his parents for the weekend. She says that she had told her parents a white lie about going to the north for the weekend.

Ian's parents are glad to meet Abby, and they tell embarrassing stories about him. Ian offers to take Abby around, and she asks him where he would like to show her. He says that the royal homes are his favorite places, and he says that he will take her to Tatton gardens "which has one of the top ten gardens in the world." (p. 99). At Tatton Park, Abby says that she likes Ian's parents, and she complains about her overprotective parents. Ian stops her where they are walking, and tells her that he likes her a lot. They draw close, and even though they start to anticipate her departure in a month, they embrace and kiss.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This is another landmark chapter for Abby, in that she shows up for her date, and then finds that it is easy to talk to Ian. Her fears of him disappear, and she discovers that they get along well. Their conversation is easy because Abby can talk about something close to her heart: her frustration with her overprotective parents. She sets up a conflict by agreeing to go with Ian to Manchester to visit his parents and see the country, but the

conflict is far off, and she enjoys meeting his parents. When she and Ian drive to Tatton Park to see the gardens, he tells Abby that he likes her a lot, and now her departure is mentioned for the first time as a painful inevitability, but there is delight to balance the anticipation of her return to New York.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Abby and Ian enjoy their visit with Ian's parents, who pull together a Sunday roast on a Saturday, to show Abby this English tradition. Abby and Ian are both exhausted when they return to London, but James is in the lobby of Abby's dorm, waiting for her. Ian leaves Abby and James alone, and Abby takes James to a pub to talk. He accuses her of not talking to him, and she complains that he was fooling around with someone else the whole time he was with Abby.

James tells Abby that he was cheating because he was scared, because he cared about her more than he expected. Abby doesn't trust him though, and she tells him that London has changed her. She says that she likes who she is, now, and she says that Ian is boyfriend. The narrator says that ever since Abby broke up with James, she had been fantasizing about him apologizing, and now she is woozy. "The old Abby would have just melted...but that was then, this was now." (p. 114). Now that she is independent and able to stand on her own, she does not feel the same way about James.

Still, Abby finds herself attracted to James again. "He was like her Achilles heel. The romantic equivalent of Kryptonite." (p. 115). But Abby resists him and he goes to a hostel, with the promise that they can see each other in the morning. Abby sees Zoe on her way to her room, and Zoe says that she saw Ian moping at the Nag's Head. Abby says that she wants to believe James, but cannot. Zoe says that Abby should do what is best for her, and Abby is nervous about checking in with her mother tomorrow, since she has lied about visiting Ian's parents and also about having paid for James' plane ticket.

Before she goes to bed, Abby finds Ian in the bar, and she tells him that it's not her fault James showed up unexpectedly, but Ian tells her that she is in charge of how long he stays, and he tells her to call him when she's worked it all out.

Chapter 8 Analysis

After the climax, of sorts, in the previous chapter, this chapter is a real crisis, complicating the plot that was on its way to being a happy tale. James' arrival, which unanticipated, will test Abby's development, to see whether she can tell what she really wants, when she has options to choose from. This chapter also bring Abby's mother back into focus, and the conflict that was foreshadowed in the beginning is as close a tomorrow's check-in call.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

James is smoking when Abby finds him in the morning. James says that they should go away together, and offers to go to Dublin with her at the weekend. He has obviously researched the options for Dublin, and Abby is both impressed and confused. She says that she'll make a decision by Tuesday, when they would need to book the tickets by. James and Abby go sightseeing, and James reads from the guidebook so that Abby is embarrassed by him. Abby shows him around and "plays the worldly ex-pat, living abroad on her own time and her own terms." (p. 124). James wants to go to the London Eye, a rotating observatory, and Abby goes with him, but says that she is afraid of heights.

James is irritating Abby with his banter and intimacy, but she is awestruck by the view from the top of the London Eye. Abby says that she can see Westminster Abbey. "I can spot Westminster Abbey from any direction, any distance. We have, like, a connection." (p. 127). "At that moment, Abby didn't know exactly what came over her...she felt dizzy. And not a bad kind of dizzy. This dizzy was something she could hold onto." (p. 128). She kisses James, and knows for sure that she will be going to Dublin at the weekend.

The scene cuts to Abby saying she wants to be dealt into a hand of poker with Zoe, Chrissy, Simon and Fred. They are laughing and having a good time when Ian and his roommate come in. Abby asks him what's on his mind, and Ian says that there's nothing for him to say, that Abby will have to figure it out on her own time.

Later, talking alone with Zoe, Abby says that she can't just choose between the two. She plans to go to Dublin, and tells Zoe that she feels really guilty about lying to her mother.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter does nothing to resolve the confusion that was introduced in the previous chapter. In fact, it only makes the confusion deeper, as Abby finds that in spite of all James' irritating qualities, she can still be drawn to him, and they have a romantic kiss on the London Eye. When Abby sees Ian afterward, she cannot tell him that she has resolved the issue yet, although she is still planning to go to Dublin with James. The resolution is nowhere in sight, yet, although Abby does seem to be much more independent than she was in the beginning.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

James and Abby arrive in Dublin and go to see Irish step dancing. They tour around Dublin, taking in the sights, including Christchurch Cathedral and the Guinness brewery. "The whole experience was totally fun, but, of course, Ian was always in the back of Abby's mind." (p. 134). She tries to call him to 'smooth things over' but cannot get through. "The best way to figure things out was to let herself just 'be' with James, which was what she was doing." (p. 135).

Watching the step dancing, Abby says that it reminds her of tap dancing: apparently she used to tap dance herself. When the dancers spread out into the audience to get people dancing, James volunteers Abby, and she gets up and begins to dance. "Abby knew that her only option was to go along and join in. She didn't want to be the wet-blanket wall-flower, after all." (p. 136). She sees James laughing at her, but she laughs as well, and he waltzes toward her, dances with her, and when he dips her and kisses her, she kisses him right back.

In the morning, James wakes Abby up with urgency: they never set an alarm, they have overslept, lockout starts in 15 minutes, and James cannot miss his flight. Abby takes charge, and begins to pack while James tries to find something for them to eat. James flies home directly from Dublin, and Abby flies back to England. Abby tells James that she had a good time with him. "It didn't feel right, hating you. I like this better, where we can at least care about each other." (p. 141).

Abby says that she remembers having good times with James, but she says that he violated her trust, and she can't forgive that. He tells her that she's different, and he says that it suits her, then he boards his plane.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter pulls things away from the direction of a resolution, and in so doing, it changes the nature of the resolution the reader expects. Instead of Abby making a simple decision to be loyal to her new guy, Ian, or to return to her first love, James, she decides to wait and see what her feelings are, and she goes to Dublin with James to learn what those feelings are. Ian and James will just have to wait.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Abby finds that she got a message from Ian, saying that he heard she is in Dublin with James, but if she called him and she wanted to talk, he says that he will listen. She gets his voicemail, and does not leave a message.

Abby gets email from Dani demanding to know all the details of her time in Dublin with James. Abby calls her parents, and her mother reminds her that she has mid-terms this week—a fact Abby had in fact completely forgotten. "Was this also part of the new and improved Abby Capshaw?" (p. 149).

Abby wakes Zoe up to talk to her, and they agree to study so that Abby can satisfy her "psycho-overprotective" parents. (p. 150). Abby emails her parents that she got two As and two Bs. She also comes clean about her activities with James, and tells them that she doesn't like the way they have been treating her, watching her every step. Abby's mother emails back that she is 'stunned' to hear that she had been lied to, and instead of resolving the issue, she tells Abby that she and Abby's father will have to give the issue more thought.

Zoe and Abby go for a walk, but Abby says that she is "tired of things that are good for me." Zoe reminds her that her time with James was just that, but Abby says that she just wanted to try something.

Zoe asks Abby what's the story with her and Ian, and Abby says that she likes Ian, but the weekend with James exhausted her, so that she doesn't know what there is to say to James, who is hurt and angry. She says that she wants to make it right, though.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter steps toward resolution and a new and improved Abby. She confesses to her parents, and takes the heat, as she says, for their anger about being lied to. But she has stated her own needs for the first time, and if she is in the same uncomfortable position James and Ian are in, waiting to her how a deliberative process will work out, she is also, it seems, strong enough to bear the consequences of her own actions.

The stage is set for this final resolution—and the emergence of a new and more mature Abby—with the question of Ian, whom Abby likes, and whose sense of hurt will measure Abby's ability to say the right things.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Abby calls her mother late on Saturday night, and her mother tells her—to her surprise—that she has called Reuben and that he raved about her "inner poise" (p. 159). Abby's mother says that she thinks she has been too hard on Abby. "I worried that you were too caught up in James," she says, "but I see now that if you were interested in dating other boys, and turned James away, then you aren't caught up at all. You're just a young woman tackling all of the choices that come along with being on your own for the first time." (p. 160).

Abby's mother says that her trust comes on one condition: that Abby never lies to her—and that she gets straight As. Abby agrees—she got two As and two Bs with only three days' studying—and she comes to the "blinding realization: Abby's parents weren't the only ones who had just recently learned to count on Abby. Over the past three months, Abby had learned to count on herself." (p. 161).

Abby allows Zoe go to Camden Market to get dye to put lavender strips in Abby's hair, to celebrate her newfound independence. Abby sees Ian coming down the aisle, and she says hello. She says that she and Zoe were buying hair dye—for her. "That's awesome," Ian says. (p. 165).

Abby tells Ian that she had a chat with her parents, and they are going to let her do things she wants to do, and Ian asks her what she wants to do. The narrator says that she still had feelings for Ian, but does not want to rush into a serious relationship. Ian says that he hopes there is space in Abby's life for him, and she says that there is. Zoe and Abby go clubbing in Shoreditch, with Ian and her friends from the SASS program. Abby dances without feeling any humiliation for expressing herself. She plans to study for finals—in order to get straight As—and she is going to go out with Ian tomorrow, on a tour at the London Dungeon. "Whatever happened between them, Ian was a part of the most exciting time Abby had known. And now the door for her and Ian was open. But it was more than that: for Abby, now all doors were open. And she was ready for whatever would come her way." (p. 168).

Chapter 12 Analysis

The resolution of the book leaves some questions unresolved—perfect for a sequel—or just for a more realistic ending, which respects Abby's growth in London. Her relationship with Ian is on stable ground, but she has attained a freedom that she did not have—by being honest with her parents—and learning to be honest with herself about what she wants. She has the power to tell her boyfriends what she wants and what she is willing to do, and she has earned her parents' respect on account of Reuben's glowing recommendation. This has been quite a summer for Abby Capshaw.



Characters

Abby Capshaw

Abby Capshaw is the main character in "Westminster Abby". She is studying abroad and having experiences for the first time away from her parents. She has just turned 16, and she is determined to have new experiences. She goes to a good private school, and gets good grades there. She feels "terminally boring." (p. 3).

James

James is the boy whom Abby's parents want to get Abby away from by sending her away to London with the SASS program. James comes to see her in London halfway through the summer, and he says that he wants her back. He tells Abby that he had cheated on her because he was so afraid of wanting her as much as he did, and she doesn't believe him until she is swept away by his presence. She goes to Dublin with him and has a great time, but ultimately keeps him at arm's length. She sends him back to New York and saves herself for Ian.

Dani

Dani is Abby's best friend, a doer to Abby's 'thinker' personality. She has been 'shaking things up' since ninth grade. Her older brother Spencer promises to get Dani and Abby into a college party.

Simon

Simon is the Irish student in the SASS group, and he has a crush on Abby from the first day. He gets together with another student named Melanie.

Zoe

Zoe is the girl with the green hair whom Abby meets on her trip. They become friends, and Zoe's outgoing personality plays against Abby's straight-laced, naïve personality. Zoe describes herself as a "green-haired comic-book geek." (p. 44). Zoe says that she is "always unfit for the public. That's what makes me fun." (p. 54)

Ian

Ian becomes Abby's boyfriend. He meets Abby at the hall pub, and then runs into her often at school. He sees her in the moment at Camden Town when she has tried on



some thigh-high zebra boots, and Abby finally steels her nerve to talk to him, even to ask him out. After that, he becomes her tour guide, and takes her to see his parents in Manchester.

Reuben

Reuben is the chaperone for the SASS students in London. He is a background figure until he talks to Abby's mother: when he gives her a glowing recommendation of Abby's inner poise, Abby's mother reconsiders her strictness with Abby, and prepares to give Abby some slack.

Abby's mother

Abby's mother stands in for both parents, for while Abby describes both parents as 'overprotective' it is only her mother whose voice the reader hears in email and dialogue. Abby's mother keeps a close eye on her, but when Abby has experiences in spite of her mother's scrutiny, and when Abby confesses about the lies she had to tell, to have those experiences, Abby's mother is not as angry as she might have been. She has heard a glowing recommendation from Reuben, the SASS mentor, and she is willing to live with a daughter who has more independence, in exchange for having more responsibility.



Objects/Places

New York

This is where Abby is from, and where she is a student in a private school.

London

This is where Abby is a student in the SASS program. She and her friends take in a number of sights there, from Camden Town to the palaces and Eton.

Guidebook

This is Abby's crutch for understanding her new environment.

Wolf & Lamb

This is a pub where Abby is taken by Zoe, Chrissy and Simon in her first day in London.

Eton

This is one of the places Abby visits with Zoe and Simon and Chrissy.

Camden Town

This is an enclave in London that Abby describes as "lurid, tawdry alternative consumerism." (p. 69). Zoe takes her there and criticizes her for her reserve.

The Hall pub

This is a pub for students, which is right in the lobby of the dormitory Abby is staying in.

Nag's Head

This is a local pub in the neighborhood of Abby's dorm. Abby takes James there to talk when he shows up unexpectedly.



Manchester

This is where Ian takes Abby to meet his parents. They prepare a Sunday roast for her—on a Saturday—and he shows her Tatton Gardens at the local estate house.

Dublin

This is where James and Abby go for a weekend. They stay in a hostel, and see the sights. The highlight of this trip is an Irish step dancing performance, where Abby gets up and joins the dancers.



Themes

Discovering new independence

"Westminster Abby" is centered on Abby's newfound confidence, that she can stand up for herself. She stands up to her 'psycho-overprotective' parents, and she stands up to the two boys in her life: one who treats her badly, and repents it, and the other, who treats her well. Abby's confidence comes from a self-respect that is bolstered by her good looks and bookishness. She is a straight-A student, so she can allow herself some experiments and experiences, even though her parents might not trust her. In the end, Abby's self-trust is borne out by her successful navigation of her relationships with James and Ian.

When James hurts her, she looks for new experiences to have, and when she finds Ian, even though she is quite nervous about talking to him, she finds that she is desirable enough that she can say what she wants without risking losing the boys who like her. With some encouragement from friends like Dani and Zoe, she takes some risks—including lying to her parents—but in the end she discovers that she is trustworthy, and that she can rely on herself to make good decisions.

Lying as against telling the truth

Abby is stuck in a tough situation in the beginning of "Westminster Abby": she has been hurt by a boy, but that same boy has caused her parents to sign her up for the SASS program in London. She is trying to make the best of her position, by looking for the new experiences, but she is also terrified by the prospect of living abroad, when she knows that her parents will be watching her every move, as much as they can. Abby's way of dealing with her parents is to lie to them—the same way she had when she went to Dani's, and Dani took her to a frat party at NYU, where Abby met James.

Even though Abby's parents have Reuben keeping an eye on her, she gets away to Manchester and then to Dublin, and she is not caught in the lie—she tells her parents the truth, and earns their respect in this way. (It also helps that Reuben gives her parents a glowing report on Abby's "inner poise," as this gives Abby's parents confidence that she can be trusted. In the end, Abby agrees to never lie to them again, and they agree to trust her—as long as she continues to get straight As.

Changes of heart

There are three changes of heart in "Westminster Abby": James', Abby's parents' and Abby's. James fools around on Abby before the novel even begins, but then realizes that he has made a mistake, and comes back for her. Abby allows him to spend time with her, but having lost her trust, James cannot win it back, especially because she has already met Ian by then. Abby's parents, who are so over-protective, have a change of



heart when they hear that Abby has earned Reuben's glowing recommendation—and when Abby herself comes clean about her travels with Ian and James. Having been overprotective and overbearing, they turn into understanding people who are reconciled to their daughter's independence.

Abby's own change of heart is the result of her friends' encouragement, and her own attractiveness. Abby never would have tried on the thigh-high zebra-striped boots, but for Zoe's encouragement, and when she does put them on, Ian sees her and she gets a glimpse of herself in his eyes—as a person she has not really tried out, before. She learns that she can try things out that she would not have tried, because she might have been embarrassed or self-conscious.

Remaining true to oneself

In a way, "Westminster Abby" is about Abby remaining true to herself, at the same time that she has a transformative experience, and becomes a new person. The person she becomes is just a spiced up version of the person she always was. The sprinkles and hot fudge she adds to her vanilla do not change the bookish person who enjoys learning about things, and uses resources like guidebooks and friends to learn about things she does not already know. The Abby who ends the book is quite similar to the Abby who starts the book, and if she has learned to have new experiences, she is also still a straight-A student who will be responsible to herself and to those around her. She has the power to balance more things in the end, than she did in the beginning, but she is also still the same girl who is concerned with balancing things, and keeping a stable life for herself.



Style

Point of View

"Westminster Abby" is written by a narrator who does not participate in the action of the book. The story is told in third-person omniscient tone, which gives the reader access to the characters' thoughts, but there are limits to the omniscience, as the narrator does not tell the characters' thoughts in explicit detail: listening to the narrative is more like watching a movie than like listening to characters' internal monologues. There are some places, though, where the novel includes emails from Abby and her friends and her mother, so that in some cases, the story is told directly by the characters, who describe their experiences and feelings directly to each other.

Setting

"Westminster Abby" is set in New York and London. New York is only included in the very beginning of the novel, as Abby has a few experiences that prepare her for her trip to London. These experiences include going to Dani's house and meeting James at a party at NYU. These scenes are related in a flashback, and the book itself starts with Abby on the plane to London, by herself for the first time. In London, Abby has a dorm room to herself. There is a pub in the lobby of the dorm, but Abby and her friends spend time together all through London, at all the major tourist sites. There is also a brief trip to Ireland, as James and Abby go to Dublin for a weekend, but this is related in a page or two, and consists mostly of a list of the tourist sites they visited.

Language and Meaning

"Westminster Abby" is narrated in straight-forward English, without too much symbolism or mystery in the meaning. The vocabulary is fairly sophisticated, as Abby is a smart girl, and the writing takes a certain amount of vocabulary for granted. But it is a story for teenage girls, not an academic or especially literary story, so the language is current and accessible.

Structure

"Westminster Abby" is told mostly from start to finish, although there are a few flashbacks where the back story is filled in. The novel starts with Abby on the plane to London, and flashes back only so far as a few months before, when Abby had met James, who will factor in the novel in the last third.

The novel is not 100% narration, though. At times, the novel uses emails between Abby and her friends Mara and Dani, and also between Abby and her mother. These emails provide direct glimpses into Abby's experiences and feelings.



Quotes

"She needed some flavor. Some hot fudge or colored sprinkles. Ideally, she could spin vanilla into hot fudge sundae." (p. 4).

"She was too young to date, her parents proclaimed, but paradoxically, she was old enough to be thrown to the proverbial wolves for the summer. The British wolves." (p. 7).

"How about we just play it by ear," Chrissy asked. Abby's eyebrows show up. "I'm not very good at that." (p. 32).

"The whole place seemed so...British. It was just as dank and gray as she'd been promised. And yet, expansive, colorless, and understated as London seemed, it was, to Abby, completely alive. " (p. 34).

"There was no way that Abby would be able to make her way through half of these books, not even if she started this afternoon and didn't come out of her dorm again until August. Apparently British students were trusted to read what was appropriate until they felt adequately self-educated on the relevant subject matter." (p. 51).

"Abby should have been frustrated. Or maybe even furious. After all she was miles away and her parents were still trying to control her. But really, she felt homesick. How could she be homesick for a place where she felt so suffocated?" (p. 54).

"Abby gazed at her reflection in disbelief. Her alter ego was impossibly tall, and, due to the tilt of the mirror, thin and angular, all legs...somehow in this context, the boobs didn't look so outrageous. In fact, they looked kind of...sexy." (p. 72).

"I can spot Westminster Abbey from any direction, any distance. We have, like, a connection." (p. 127).

"At that moment, Abby didn't know exactly what came over her...she felt dizzy. And not a bad kind of dizzy. This dizzy was something she could hold onto." (p. 128).

"Abby knew that her only option was to go along and join in. She didn't want to be the wet-blanket wall-flower, after all." (p. 136).

"I'm not going to be bullied, or pressured into making a decision that I'm not ready to make." (p. 142).

"I worried that you were too caught up in James, but I see now that if you were interested in dating other boys, and turned James away, then you aren't caught up at all. You're just a young woman tackling all of the choices that come along with being on your own for the first time." (p. 160).

"Abby's parents weren't the only ones who had just recently learned to count on Abby. Over the past three months, Abby had learned to count on herself." (p. 161).



Topics for Discussion

Throughout "Westminster Abby", Abby is torn between fear and curiosity. What kinds of things does she do to protect herself against new experiences, and what kinds of things does she open herself to? How does she strike a new balance between her fears and her curiosity?

In what ways is Abby a new person at the end of "Westminster Abby"? In what ways is she still the same person she was before she left? What were the primary forces that pushed her to have the experiences she has in the book? Who are the primary influences on Abby? Who is the strongest influence on her?

What is the moral of "Westminster Abby", and how does the novel convey that moral? What competing morals does the book also present, and how does the moral emerge in the end, to teach the one lesson it teaches? (Put another way: what alternate endings seem possible, and how does the book steer itself to the one ending it ends with?)

Debate the proposition that Abby is no one without her friends and family.

At many points in "Westminster Abby", Abby is confused by things happening around her, or even by her own feelings. In some cases, she learns to understand things she is confused by, but in other cases, she simply learns to live with the confusion. What strategies does Abby use, to make confusing experiences bearable?

Abby does not simply inhale her new knowledge, but she perceives it and tests it out before she can claim it as her own. Where does Abby rehearse her new independence, and how does she test it out first, before she can claim it as her own?

What parts of Abby are distinctly American, and what parts of her are culturally flexible, that allow her to fit into British society? What makes "Westminster Abby" an 'American' novel?