

What Hearts Study Guide

What Hearts by Bruce Brooks

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Plot Summary

What Hearts by Bruce Brooks is the story of a young boy growing up in a world of uncertainty. Asa is only seven when he returns home from school to discover his parents are getting divorced and his mother is taking him from the only home he has known to a new one that includes a new stepfather. Over the next few years Asa's family moves repetitively in part because of the clinical depression that rules his mother's moods. Asa has become quite adept at making friends, but finds he still struggles when it comes to compassion. Asa tries to befriend his stepfather but finds it nearly impossible when his mother finally decides it is time for another divorce. What Hearts is a story of one boy's coming of age, struggling to be the kind of person he believes he ought to be.

Asa leaves school on the last day of first grade with a perfect report card and excitement for the coming summer. However, when Asa arrives at home he discovers that his parents have emptied out their small apartment in preparation for a divorce. Asa travels with his mother to North Carolina where she meets up with Dave, a man who has loved her since high school. Asa is determined to like Dave because he knows it will make his mother happy, but when his enthusiasm leads to irritation for Dave, Asa feels free to hate him.

After dinner, Dave takes Asa and his mother to the boardwalk and puts Asa on a roller coaster to give himself some time alone with Asa's mother. However, Asa panics on the ride and screams until his mother forces the operator to stop the ride. The three of them return to the cabins Dave has rented for them. Asa falls asleep. When he wakes a few hours later, Asa finds his mother gone. Asa sneaks out of the house and returns to the roller coaster and rides it over and over to prove he can.

A few years later Asa begins fourth grade in a new school. Asa quickly makes friends by reading the people around him and figuring out how to act to make friends. A few days later, however, Asa is thrown when he learns that each student is supposed to perform some kind of act in a fundraiser for the school. Asa is teamed with Joel, a simple minded child who is to perform a poem. Asa finds the poem too simple and picks a longer, more difficult poem to perform and he attempts to teach it to Joel, but Joel struggles. Finally Joel's mother calls Asa and tells him that she will arrange for Joel to be out of school the day of the show. However, Joel shows up anyway and Asa is forced to return to the easier poem to save his friendship with Joel.

Another few years pass. Asa finds common ground with his stepfather when they begin playing sports together. Asa pushes Dave to teach him baseball even though Dave knows little about baseball. Asa says he wants to try out for little league. One afternoon Dave becomes irritated with Asa and hits him with the baseball. After that Asa refuses to go out with Dave, but his mother takes his place.

One night Asa wakes to discover his mother has taken an overdose of sleeping pills. Asa helps Dave feed her coffee, but later Asa's mother tries to hurt herself with broken



glass. Dave drives Asa's mother into Raleigh to be placed in a hospital once more, ruining Asa's chance at the baseball tryout.

Asa falls in love with a girl in his seventh grade class. Asa tells the girl that he loves her, but that same day learns that he is moving again, for the first time in three years, because his mother has decided to divorce Dave. The next day, the girl tells Asa that she loves him too with a couple of heart shaped candies. However, the girl becomes angry when she learns Asa is leaving. That night, on the way out of town, the car has a flat tire and the family decides to stay one more night together. Asa calls the girl, but she does not even remember his declaration of love.



As If: Chapters 1-6

As If: Chapters 1-6 Summary

This novel is written in four interrelated short stories that feature the same characters. Each story progresses forward in a linear fashion that allows the reader to see the changes and growth of the characters over time.

Chapter 1. It is the last day of first grade and Asa is happily making his way home to show his perfect report card to his parents. Asa also comes home with a new book from the librarian and a bunch of radishes he grew himself as part of a class project. Asa tries to give one of the radishes to the crossing guard, but she refuses it. Asa then stops to talk to Bobby Levy, a young man from private school who often tells Asa about the television programs he watches after school. However, Bobby has no interest in the radishes or Asa's grades.

Chapter 2. Asa arrives home and finds his mother sitting in front of their apartment waiting for him with a bunch of suitcases. Asa rushes into the apartment and finds it empty.

Chapter 3. Asa learns that his parents are divorcing and his mother is taking him to the beach in North Carolina. Asa thinks about how proud of Washington DC his father was. Asa looks at the city for the last time as his mother tells him about Dave, the man they will meet in North Carolina.

Chapter 4. Asa is determined to like Dave, therefore he tells him great stories that are mostly imagination. Dave becomes tired of the constant chatter and snaps at Asa, making fun of his lies. Dave continues to be rude, giving Asa a reason to dislike him. Dave takes Asa and his mother to a couple of bungalows he has rented for them. When left alone, Asa's mother tries to explain away Dave's behavior toward Asa.

Chapter 5. After dinner, Asa, his mother, and Dave walk on the boardwalk. Dave takes them to the pier and pays for Asa to ride a roller coaster. Asa is okay at first. However, when he sees his mother and Dave disappear he begins to scream. Asa's mother makes the ride operator stop the ride so she can get her son off.

Chapter 6. Asa and Dave wait outside a phone booth while Asa's mother calls his father. Dave was angry after the roller coaster, calling Asa a sissy, but he later apologizes. Asa goes to sleep almost as soon as he and his mother get back to the bungalow. When he wakes several hours later, he finds his mother gone. Asa takes some money from her purse and goes back to the pier, riding the roller coaster again.



As If: Chapters 1-6 Analysis

This beginning story introduces the characters of the novel. Asa is seven in this story, a first grader who comes home from the last day of school excited by his achievements and the long summer waiting for him. When he returns home, however, Asa discovers that his mother has decided to divorce his father and take him to North Carolina. Asa takes this change well, not screaming or crying, but simply going with his mother.

When Asa meets Dave he is not impressed with him, but he is determined to like him for his mother. However, when Asa's nervousness causes him to make up outrageous stories about himself and Dave reacts with ridicule, Asa immediately begins to hate him. Dave is clearly unhappy with Asa's presence in his relationship with Asa's mother and he does not hide his unhappiness well.

Dave puts Asa on a roller coaster and encourages him to ride so that he might be alone with Asa's mother. However, Asa becomes frightened when he cannot see his mother any longer. Asa's mother takes him off the ride, but Dave continues to be darkly angry with Asa. Later Asa returns to the roller coaster to ride it again. However, the reader must come to realize that Asa is imagining this second ride on the roller coaster because he claims to push up the bar and stand during the ride, something that a seven year old would never be allowed to do. Asa imagines this because he is imagining that he is flying above reality and adjusting to the unhappiness that awaits his future.



Not Blue: Chapters 1-4

Not Blue: Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1. Asa has just arrived at his new fourth grade classroom. Asa immediately likes the teacher because he can see she is the hands on type. Asa is immediately taken into the classroom and integrated into a group of boys his own age to work on an assignment dealing with Romans. Asa is impressive with his presentation and quickly gains a number of friends. In fact, Asa has moved so often in the past few years that he knows how to read people and knows how to behave in order to make friends. By the end of the first week, Asa has already made many friends. However, this instant acceptance is disrupted when Asa learns that every kid in the class is supposed to make some sort of presentation for a PTA Membership drive. Asa is teamed with Joel to read a poem. The poem is called Little Boy Blue and it is the most boring, childish poem Asa has ever read. Asa finds another poem that he finds more exciting.

Chapter 2. Asa works with Joel trying to help him memorize the poem, but Joel struggles. Asa even cuts the number of stanzas Joel will have to remember, but he still cannot remember them. Joel works hard, but continues to fail to remember the stanzas. Joel then begins missing practice sessions. Asa arranges to work with him over the weekend, even making sandwiches for him. However, Joel calls and announces that he is not coming but that Joel should come to his house. Joel arrives and can see Joel playing with his siblings. Asa is struck with a sense of loneliness and creeps away, crying.

Chapter 3. Joel's mother calls Asa and tells him that Joel will not be ready to read the new poem in time. Then Joel's mother tells Asa that she will keep Joel at home and distract him, keeping him from the performance. Asa finds the phone call odd, but is relieved by it because now he can perform the poem on his own.

Chapter 4. Asa is backstage waiting for his turn to present his poem when he sees Joel's mother arrive panicked at the back of the auditorium. A moment later Asa sees Joel arrive. Asa pushes his way on stage one performer too soon and watches Joel slowly realize what has happened. Although Joel looks up at him with understanding, Asa feels guilty. For that reason Asa decides to include Joel and to present the original poem instead of the new one.

Not Blue: Chapters 1-4 Analysis

In this short story Asa is a few years older and has moved around a lot. Asa has become an expert at making friends and he is desperate to be liked by his classmates. Things at home have become difficult for Asa. Asa's stepfather is demanding and controlling. This causes Asa to get in trouble quite often and to feel as though he is not good enough. For this reason, Asa desperately wants to be liked by his classmates.



Asa befriends Joel, but dislikes the baby-like poem he and Joel are to do in a PTA presentation. For this reason Asa decides to change the poem and teach the new one to Joel himself. However, it does not go well and Joel's mother arranges to keep Joel home so that Asa might perform the piece himself. Asa shows his true colors when Joel shows up anyway. Desperate to keep his friend, Asa changes back to the other poem and includes Joel.



Out: Chapters 1-4

Out: Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1. Asa plays centerfield for a little league baseball team. Asa knows Dave and his mother are in the stands cheering for him. Asa plays well, fielding the balls and batting well when his turn comes.

Chapter 2. When Asa, his mother and stepfather move into the big two story house Dave does not want him to have the large bedroom upstairs. Asa believes it is because it offers him privacy. Dave and Asa's mother argue over it with Asa finally getting the room. However, Dave often walks in unannounced as though expecting to catch Asa doing something wrong. One day Dave comes into Asa's room and asks him to play football. Over the next few months they play both football and basketball. They build something of a relationship over sports, but Asa continues to feel bullied by Dave. Then one day Asa asks Dave to teach him baseball so that he might try out for the Little League. Dave does not think much of baseball, but he agrees.

Chapter 3. The Table Talk team is playing against the Cool Guys, but by the fifth neither team has scored. Asa makes a catch and throws the ball to the third baseman, keeping the other team from scoring. Asa then plays pinch hitter and nearly makes the first run, but is called out despite his confidence that he was safe. When Asa bats again, he finds himself on base. When the player behind him hits a single, Asa rushes for home but the batter is called out.

Chapter 4. Dave and Asa work for weeks on baseball. However, one day Dave becomes annoyed with Asa and throws a baseball at him, bruising him. Asa retaliates by hitting a ball over Dave's head. Dave stops taking Asa to the baseball field after that, but Asa goes with his mother. They work out fairly well even though Asa's mother does not play well. Then one day Asa's mother sees the bruise caused by Dave's baseball. That night, Asa is awakened by Dave who needs Asa's help pouring hot coffee down Asa's mother's mouth after she took an overdose of sleeping pills. Later in the night, Asa's mother tries to hurt herself with broken glass. Asa and Dave load her in the car and begin the drive to Raleigh where she will be placed in a psychiatric hospital. Asa realizes this will cause him to miss the Little League tryouts. However, Asa lies to Dave and tells him he never intended to try out.

Out: Chapters 1-4 Analysis

This novel begins with the description of a baseball game in which Asa is a key player. This description continues throughout the story. However, the reader comes to realize that Asa never tried out for Little League and therefore could never have played these games. It is all in Asa's imagination.



The situation at home becomes more apparent in this story. Asa's mother suffers from clinical depression and she has spent several long months in psychiatric hospitals to help her handle the situation. The reader can see that this situation has taken a toll on Asa and is more than likely responsible for the many moves Asa and his family have made over the past few years. Not only this, but the reader can see the toll all this takes on Dave as well, suggesting a reason for his difficulties with Asa. This story sheds a more sympathetic light on Dave, allowing the reader to realize what a difficult situation in which he has found himself by marrying the love of his life.



What Hearts?: Chapters 1-5

What Hearts?: Chapters 1-5 Summary

Chapter 1. In seventh grade, Asa finds himself in love with a girl in his class. Asa has remained in the same school for more than three years now, a record in his life. The girl has been in Asa's class all those years and she once told him that she knows how he makes friends with this sort of attack he does when he figures everyone out. Asa feels as though she is the only one who knows him and he loves her. Being in love has caused the world to change for Asa and he notices new things, such as the lyrics of music he has always listened to.

Chapter 2. Asa's mother has been heavily medicated since her last trip to the hospital over a year ago. Every day it is Asa's job to make sure his mother takes her pills. One day Asa asks his mother about love. Asa's mother tells him that being in love is as much a choice as anything else. Asa's mother then becomes sad and tells Asa she no longer wants to take her pills, that she does not want to live her life in a fog. Asa's mother also hints that she no longer loves Dave. Asa relents under pressure from his mother and does not force her to take her pill.

Chapter 3. The first chance Asa has to be alone with Jean, he tells her he loves her. Jean reacts with fear and it makes Asa aware of how much of a child she still is. When Asa returns home from school that night, his mother tells him that she is divorcing Dave. They will leave the following day. Asa goes to his room and begins to pack. When he is done, he goes downstairs and finds Dave alone in the backyard. Dave tells Asa that he loves him. Dave says that he did not love Asa at first because he felt he had to and he hates doing things he has to do. However, Dave had come to love Asa over their time together and is saddened by their parting. Dave wants Asa to return the sentiment, but Asa cannot.

Chapter 4. The next day at school, a friend of Jean's gives Asa two candy hearts that say I love you. To Asa it means Jean loves him too. Asa is excited until their teacher makes the announcement that Asa is leaving. Jean becomes angry and leaves the classroom without speaking to Asa.

Chapter 5. Dave is driving Asa and his mother to Raleigh when the car has a flat tire. When they learn it will be hours before the tire will be fixed, they decide to go back to the house and wait until the following day. When they arrive at the house, Asa calls Jean. Unfortunately, Jean is so excited about another boy announcing his love for her that she has forgotten all about Asa. Asa does not let it get him down, however, because he believes that if one person loved him then another will someday.



What Hearts?: Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Asa is a teenager now and has his first crush on a young girl. When Asa talks to his mother about his new love, she begins to think about her own life. Asa's mother has been heavily drugged since her last trip to the hospital. The drugs have controlled her mood swings, but they leave her in a fog. Asa's mother feels she is missing out on her son's life and she decides to stop taking the pills. With this comes the decision to divorce Dave and move on.

Asa tells the young woman he loves her and receives a positive response. Asa also learns that Dave loves him and wants to be a good father to him despite all their differences. This upsets Asa, but he cannot make himself tell Dave he never loved him. Asa has grown and become aware of the complications that come with adult emotions. Therefore when the young girl forgets quickly about Asa he is not upset. Asa knows there is more to life than that moment and he looks forward to it.



Characters

Asa

Asa is the main character in all four of the short stories that make up this novel. Asa is seven when the novel begins, a bright young man who is excited to show his parents the straight As on his report card. However, when Asa arrives at home he discovers that his mother has decided to divorce his father and take him to North Carolina to her home town. All at once Asa's life is turned upside down. Asa does not see his father again, but he gains a stepfather who is angry and resentful of his new stepson.

Asa grows over the next couple of years as he deals with the frustrations of a stepfather who does not love him and a mother who suffers from depression. Asa finds himself easily able to read people and make friends at school and he utilizes this ability in order to keep his loneliness at bay. However, when this skill is endangered by a poem he insisted on reading in the fourth grade, he makes a quick change of the program in order to keep from losing his one good friend.

As Asa continues to struggle in his relationship with his stepfather, he finds a way to communicate with him. They begin sharing sports with one another. However, even this begins to fall apart when Asa discovers that he is smarter than his stepfather and can figure out the game quicker. Father and son are at odds, but find common ground when Asa's mother suffers another bout of depression. In the end this is not enough, however, when Asa discovers that his mother is taking him from Dave too.

Asa's Mother

Asa's mother is clinically depressed. Asa's mother is often spontaneous in her decisions, leaving her first husband without so much as a goodbye. Asa's mother is a good mother, but her depression often causes her to act in ways that cause upheaval in Asa's life. They move often, most likely due to her frequent hospitalizations. It is a difficult life for Asa made even more difficult when his mother refuses to take her medication and turns their lives upside down once more when she decides to divorce her second husband, Dave.

Dave

Dave had been in love with Asa's mother since high school. When Asa's mother makes the separation from her first husband it is Dave to whom she turns. Dave marries her and takes the responsibility of raising Asa with her. However, Dave resents Asa from the first moment they meet and it takes him a long time to accept the boy in his life. Not only this, but Dave has different ideas of how to raise the boy, therefore he and Asa's mother often argue about Asa. It is a difficult situation made even more so by the depression Asa's mother suffers. Dave often finds himself in the position of being parent and



caretaker to the woman he loves, making decisions that could mean life or death for her. It is a difficult situation, one that eventually has a toll not only on Dave's relationship with Asa, but with his mother as well.

Joel

Joel is a young man in Asa's fourth grade class with whom he is to do a poem. Joel is not highly intelligent and he has trouble learning. When Asa picks a new poem for him and Joel to do for the PTA membership drive kickoff, Joel is unable to keep up. In the end, Asa thinks he might do the poem without Joel, but ends up returning to an earlier poem that Joel can do easily.

Joel's Mother

Joel's mother calls Asa the day before the PTA program to tell him that there is no way Joel will learn the poem in time and asks what he wants to do. Asa admits he would not mind doing the poem on his own. Joel's mother tells Asa that she will keep Joel out of school, take him to a movie, and then have family game night to keep him distracted so that he will not go to the program. This does not work, however, and Joel remembers the program, arriving just in time to present his part of the poem.

Jean Williams

Jean Williams is a girl in Asa's seventh grade class. Asa is in love with Jean because he believes she is the only person to really see him for who he is. However, Asa comes to realize that Jean is nothing but a child and his declaration of love causes her a great deal of fear. Jean responds to this declaration of love with one of her own, but by that afternoon she has forgotten all about it.

Robert Pontiac

Robert Pontiac is a boy in Asa's class who is chronically comical. Robert has the nickname Booger. Asa does not like or dislike Robert. However, it is Robert's declaration of love for Jean that causes her to forget all about Asa.

Bobby Levy

Bobby Levy is a little boy in Washington DC who is about the same age as Asa but attends a different school. Bobby is allowed to watch television after school and he often tells Asa all about the latest TV shows as he passes under his balcony after school. Bobby is the only one Asa is able to tell about his final grades in first grade because this is the same day his mother has decided to leave his father.



Nadine

Nadine is the crossing guard Asa sees everyday as he walks to and from school. Asa loves Nadine and the nickname she has given him, Captain. Asa tries to give Nadine a radish on the last day of school but she refuses because she does not like radishes.

Mrs. Brock

Mrs. Brock is Asa's fourth grade teacher. Asa likes Mrs. Brock immediately because she is a hands on teacher who likes to allow her students to interact with one another instead of with a book. However, it is Mrs. Brock's oversight on the PTA program that causes Asa to have to team with Joel on Little Boy Blue.



Objects/Places

Backpack

Asa is wearing a backpack stuffed with books and papers on his last day of first grade.

Elephant Project

Asa does an elephant project that he makes on many pieces of paper taped together on his first week in his new fourth grade class.

Book

Joel gives Asa an old book of poems that includes both Little Boy Blue and The Highwayman.

Baseball

In a fit of frustration, Dave hits Asa with a baseball leaving a large bruise on his chest.

Hearts

Jean gives Asa two candy hearts that each say I love you.

Pills

Asa's mother must take pills to control her depression. However, these pills make her feel foggy and she chooses to stop taking them.

Car

The tire on Dave's car goes flat while he is driving Asa and his mother to Raleigh at the end of their marriage. This causes them to decide to return to the house and live as a family for one more night.

Roller Coaster

Dave encourages Asa to ride a roller coaster at the pier so that Dave might have time alone with Asa's mother.



Washington, D.C.

The novel begins in Washington, D.C. where Asa lives with his mother and father.

North Carolina

Asa's mother moves him to North Carolina when she decides to divorce her first husband and marry Dave.



Themes

Coming of Age

These four stories when taken as one show the growth and maturity of one young man. Asa begins this novel a mature seven year old who is taken out of his family and all that is familiar to him and placed in a new place and family. Asa reacts to this by making up stories and becoming frightened when he loses sight of his mother. Asa is a child and he reacts as a child would.

Later, Asa grows and becomes a precocious eleven year old. Asa makes friends easily because he can read them and guess what they want from him. By doing this, Asa quickly makes many friends in his new fourth grade class. However, his friendships are placed in danger when he is forced to do a poem in a program with another boy. Asa tries to liven it up by doing an exciting poem, but the boy with whom he is working cannot handle the new poem. For this reason Asa makes the mature choice to do the lesser of the two poems instead.

Asa continues to grow, but he also begins to find relief from reality in his imagination. Asa makes up stories about playing baseball because real life has grown too difficult to handle. However, living in his imagination can only last a short time. Asa is eventually drawn out into the real world again when he falls in love. Asa confesses his love to this girl only to be taken from her when his mother decides to divorce his stepfather. Asa accepts this with the same grace he accepted the first divorce and embraces the idea that life holds great promise despite all its pitfalls.

Dysfunctional Family

Asa's family is a typical dysfunctional one. Asa's mother has clinical depression and she often falls into deep depressions that cause her to have to be hospitalized. Asa's stepfather resents him and has trouble interacting with him. In fact, the only way Dave can deal with Asa is through sports, something at which Asa discovers he can be very good.

Dysfunction is characterized by an inability to function in a normal capacity. Asa's family moves often, more than twice a year, and has difficulty getting along. Asa is unhappy in his home life and therefore talks about it little in his narrative. However, pieces of his home life find their way into his narrative until the reader gets a picture of a dark and difficult life. Therefore, Asa's ability to rise above it all and become a mature young man is commendable.



Imagination

Asa has a great imagination. In the first story, Asa regales Dave with stories of his accomplishments in school and sports in such a fashion that it is clear to Dave that it is all lies. Later Asa believes that he goes on a roller coaster and stands up, flying free like a bird. Clearly these things are not true, but they make Asa feel better about himself and his situation.

Later in the novel Asa imagines two baseball teams and the games they play. The reader believes they are real until Asa admits that he had never tried out for Little League because his mother had had another depressive episode that had caused her and Dave to drive her to Raleigh. Asa uses his imagination to help him through difficult periods in his life, a reality that makes the reader even more sympathetic toward his character and hope for some kind of happiness later in his life.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the third person point of view. The entire novel is seen through the eyes of Asa, a young man who is struggling to survive despite his mother's difficult illness and his stepfather's distance. There are points in the novel in which the reader becomes aware that Asa is an unreliable narrator because he describes things that could not possibly have happened.

The point of view of this novel is typical of modern novels. The difference in this one is the unreliability of the narrator. Asa describes doing things he could not have done and playing baseball games the reader later realizes he did not play because he never tried out for Little League. These moments of unreliability allow the reader to see how Asa deals with stress and how the illness his mother suffers impacts him. It is a unique point of view, but it works well with this novel.

Setting

The novel is set in North Carolina in the early sixties. At the beginning of the novel, the characters are in Washington, D.C. but quickly leave for the beaches of North Carolina. From there the characters move quite frequently, often moving more than twice a year. The family finally settles in a two story house in an unnamed town more than an hour's drive from Raleigh.

The setting of the novel has little impact on the overall story. The setting is transitory, making the reader aware of the difficulties the main character has with his life and the instability in it. Asa is forced to move in the first part of the book and the reader learns that he moves often over the next three years before his family finally settles in one place for a little over three years. However, this sense of security is broken when Asa's mother announces they will be moving once again. For this reason the setting of the novel has little impact on the stories and, in fact, has more impact on the transitory sense of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in simple English. The novel was written with the intended audience of young readers. For this reason, the novel contains no difficult foreign languages or slang that the readers cannot understand.

The novel is written in such a way that the reader believes the main narrator is the writer. The main narrator is a boy who begins at the age of seven and grows to the age of thirteen as the novel progresses. The language remains true to this narrator, never using words that a reader cannot reasonably believe a child of that age could know and

understand. For this reason the language of this novel is true to both the characters and the intended audience.

Structure

The novel is divided into four short stories, each with its own set of short chapters. The novel begins when the main character is seven and progresses in a linear style until the child is thirteen. The novel is told in both exposition and dialogue, but the majority of the novel is told in exposition or the internal dialogue of the main character.

The novel contains four main plots and several subplots. One of the main plots follows Asa as he learns of his parents' divorce and follows his mother to North Carolina. Another main plot follows Asa as he attempts to get a boy to read a difficult poem but in need of friendship, Asa decides to recite a simpler poem instead. Subplots explore Asa's struggles in fitting in at school and the frequent moves that make this difficult. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of each short story.



Quotes

"Asa was amazed that he left first grade with so much stuff." As If: Chapter 1, pg. 3

"Why was she wearing a coat? It was cool under the dense leaves of the high trees, but a coat was not right, not in Maryland in June. A coat was not right. As if to protest, Asa shivered."

As If: Chapter 2, pg. 11

"Asa stood up straight into the warm wind and gathered his strength, as if to jump, as if to fly, as if, as if, as if." As If: Chapter 6, pg. 36

"Oh, Asa knew how to make the most of an opportunity for debut." Not Blue: Chapter 1, pg. 42

"Joel was now responsible for telling the audience about the moon being a ghostly galleon, about Tim the ostler's white peaked face, about the brave robber with the twinkling pistol butts rising in the saddle to kiss his bonny sweetheart while his face burnt and her perfumed hair tumbled all over him, and, best of all, about the gallant, galloping fellow turning back on the murderous redcoats, shrieking a curse to the sky with the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high." Not Blue: Chapter 2, pg. 63

"And there, in those bright eyes, Asa watched the flutter of pain disappear, replaced in a flicker by cheery acquiescence." Not Blue: Chapter 4, pg. 81

"This was the peril of playing in the second game of the evening: the dew always fell." Out: Chapter 1, pg. 85

"So now, filled with this urgent sympathy, Asa went on babbling to his mom about how difficult being a stepfather must be." Out: Chapter 4, pg. 130

"And suddenly Asa could feel clearly that Dave's anger was curling toward the woman in the backseat. It was her fault. She had done this, deprived his stepson of a chance to be a regular boy." Out: Chapter 4, pg. 143

"Asa was in love." What Hearts?: Chapter 1, pg. 149

"Another difference this time, of course, was that the man they were leaving was sitting right there, lumpy and still in the dark, listening, presumed to agree, ready to be helpful in delivering them out of his life." What Hearts?: Chapter 3, pg. 171

"Somewhere down the road, surely, these words would be made good." What Hearts?: Chapter 5, pg. 194



Topics for Discussion

Who is Asa? How does he react to the impending divorce of his parents? How does he respond to his new stepfather? How does his stepfather react to him? Why is this a difficult relationship? Why does Asa tell lies? Why does he react as he does on the roller coaster? How does Dave react to this behavior?

Who is Joel? Why does Asa find himself forced to do a poem with Joel? Why does Asa want to do a harder poem? Why does Joel have so much trouble learning the new poem? Why does Joel begin missing practice sessions? How does Asa react to this? Why does Asa cry when he sees Joel playing with his siblings?

Why does Joel show up at the performance? What did Joel's mother promise to do with Joel the day of the performance? Why did she fail? What does Asa decide to do about this? What does he do? For what reason? Why is Asa so afraid of losing his friends?

Why does Asa want to play baseball? What does this say about his relationship with Dave? How does Dave get Asa to play sports? Why does he not want to help Asa with baseball at first? What does Dave think of baseball? Why does Dave hit Asa with a baseball? Did Asa deserve the hit?

Why does Asa stop practicing baseball with Dave? How does Asa's mother react to the bruises on Asa's chest from Dave's baseball? Why does she take an overdose of pills? How does Dave react to this? Why do Dave and Asa argue over Dave's handling of the situation? Why does Asa later lie about not wanting to try out for the Little League? Is this to save Dave's feelings or to protect Asa's mother?

Who is Jean Williams? Why does Asa believe he is in love with her? What does love change for Asa? Why does he listen to music differently? Why does Asa talk to his mother about his love for Jean? How does she react? Why does Asa's mother stop taking her pills? How does this impact Asa's future? Should Asa have fought his mother on the pills more?

What is an unreliable narrator? How is Asa an unreliable narrator? What does this say about the stories in the book? What does this say about the themes in the book? How does an unreliable narrator force a reader to look closer at the stories?