

When Mystical Creatures Attack! Study Guide

When Mystical Creatures Attack! by Kathleen Founds

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Contents

When Mystical Creatures Attack! Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
When Mystical Creatures Attack, Warm Greetings, The Un-Game, Before, I Have Borne Witness.....	6
The Turnip, Nicoli, Today is my Birthday, Frankye, Recipes for Disaster.....	13
Black Socketed, The Wormhole, The Holy Innocent, First the Sea, Mexico Foxtrot.....	19
Their Trunks, Virtue of the Month, Elephants Never Forget, Uncommon Happiness, In the Hall	23
Faux Rose, Hurry Up, Resurrection Snow Globe, Like the Russian Said, The Apple.....	27
Characters.....	31
Symbols and Symbolism.....	35
Settings.....	38
Themes and Motifs.....	39
Styles.....	42
Quotes.....	43



Plot Summary

When *Mystical Creatures Attack* by Kathleen Found is an award winning collection of short stories that chronicle a short span of time in the life of a young teacher in Texas. It begins with Laura Freedman reading over some essays from her students.

The prompt has been that they are to choose mythological creatures that they admire, then have that creature solve some sort of world problem. Through the essays the reader learns that Ms. Freedman teaches the lower level reading class and that it is her first year of teaching. One of her students, Kristi, is pregnant by another of her students, Danny. Janice Gibbs is a goth girl with a bad home life, and Cody Splunk is a very talented nerd type that doesn't test well. There are other students in the classroom, but the main students interact with Laura more.

The reader sees that initially Laura loves teaching, or the idea of teaching, but that eventually she sees that what she had assumed and what the reality truthfully was were two different things. She becomes more tired and despondent. Then, for no reason, as far as the students knew, their teacher picks up a terrarium and throws it out of the window telling them that she's done. Then, she simply disappears.

One of the students, Janice Gibbs is determined to find Ms. Freedman. Janice works at a nursing home and aspires to being a doctor. She finally tracks down Ms. Freedman who has been admitted to Bridges Wellness Center, which Janice calls 'the looney bin'. Laura had stopped taking her meds for bipolar disorder and had a break with reality.

Laura finds herself unhappy with the regimented program at Bridges. They have a Wellness Points system and residents are required to 'play' the Wellness game. Laura usurps the system as often as she can, but does participate in the journaling exercises. She receives letters from Janice and the reader learns that Laura had left the classroom that day, then boarded a bus for Arizona where authorities found her sitting on a park bench feeding hamburgers to pigeons. They called her brother Stephen, who had her committed.

Janice wants to know when she will be coming back because the substitute, whom they all call The Sir, is terrible. Laura says that they can't possibly miss her that much since they abused her so religiously, even going so far as to steal her personal journal. Janice tells her that she is wrong...they loved her.

Janice receives a letter from Bridges saying that Laura can no longer have outside stimulus as it will derail the therapy. Janice has problems of her own. Her father has moved to Ky for work and has moved in with his longtime girlfriend, Glenda (who hates Janice). Acting out, Janice tells her father that she's failing and insinuates that while living at her aunt's house that she's having sex with Danny. Glenda suspects that Janice is lying and verifies that none of that is happening. She threatens Janice. Janice learns that Glenda has her real mother's email address and asks for it in exchange for staying away. They agree. Janice is disappointed when she reaches out to her biological



mother, and is rejected yet again. In an act of defiance she gets drunk and sleeps with Danny.

Janice ends up pregnant and is determined to starve herself into a miscarriage. She is told that one can't do that, that it doesn't work that way, but one day she does miscarry. Janice, who has been raised Catholic, believes that she has committed a mortal sin and cannot forgive herself. She loses her job at the nursing home because she was found to be taking some of the resident's pills. She takes pain killers after she was attacked on the job at the convenient store, and becomes addicted.

Meanwhile, back at Bridges, Laura is exploring her memories of her father and her mother. She realizes that her both of her parents disappointed her for various reasons. The only unconditional love she had as a child was from a kindly neighbor woman named Frankye. When Frankye died it changed Laura and she decided to help others and to be kind, like Frankye. This influenced her to become a teacher and to help the poor.

Janice is arrested for stealing money from her cashier's drawer at the store. Going through withdrawal she is rescued and bailed out of jail. She lives in a halfway house where she reads Ms. Freedman's old journal, which she stole from Danny (who had had it all this time). She reads something in the journal that makes her realize that she needs a change. She calls her father and asks to come home. It becomes a turning point for her and she goes to community college and straightens her life out.

Laura is eventually released from Bridges and begins writing a popular blog called Uncommon Happiness. Many people write to her for advice about happiness. As much as she's able to offer insight, she does. She is married to a man named Ben and they decide to have their first child. Meanwhile, she learns that one of her students, Cody Splunk, is now a famous author. She is so proud of him.

Cody contacts Janice and they go out. Later, Cody proposes to her, but she rejects him. They continue to speak to one another until one day, she realizes that she has been stupid and they ride away together in the sunshine (on the back of an Unicorn if Cody's story is to be believed).

Laura, unfortunately, has not fared as well. In order to have the child, whom she's named Rose, she's had to go off of her medications. At first it is manageable, but by the time she has Rose, she's having full blown episodes. When they bring the baby to her to breastfeed she looks at the baby in horror, declaring that this child is not her baby. She has a breakdown and they have to institutionalize her. After a few weeks they have her back on her meds and it seems that things are fine. Then she disappears with the baby.

Ben is frantic and in two days' time the police find the baby abandoned, and safe, in a gas station bathroom. But Laura is still gone. Janice comes to Laura's house and hands Ben Laura's old journal. She thinks that maybe it might help. Ben reads the journal hoping for insight.



Meanwhile, Laura has made her way back to her father's home, which is up for sale and vacant. Her mother has met her in a cemetery and suggested that she go to the old house to end it all. Laura argues with her mother but gives in and at least goes to the house. She drives into the garage and shuts the door with the car running. She dreams.

In the dream an angel offers her a chance at redemption. Laura takes hold of the apple that is offered and it pulls her out of hell. Attached to her ankles are the souls of her father, mother, and others. Instead of kicking them loose for holding her down, she turns toward the angel, determined to save them all.



When Mystical Creatures Attack, Warm Greetings, The Un-Game, Before, I Have Borne Witness

Summary

How the Minotaur Changed the Legal Drinking Age to 16 -

In this two paragraph story, Danny Ramirez decides that his favorite mystical creature is the Minotaur and his sociopolitical issue for it to tackle would be lowering the legal drinking age to 16. If this were done then the injustice of breaking into someone's locker looking for drugs or alcohol would be abolished and locks wouldn't be broken. He hopes that his lock will be paid for since it was demolished for no good reason.

How the Unicorn Stabbed Danny Ramirez in the Heart Seven Times, Which Is What He Deserves, for Breaking Up with Me Like That -

In this student's essay, Andrea is upset because Danny broke up with her. She argues that she doesn't believe in mystical creatures and that the entire idea of a book transporting a person somewhere else is crap since eventually the book is closed and one is back in the harsh reality where boys poke at your crotch with pencils and mean girls corner you in the bathroom.

How the Werewolf Solved the Problem of Hunger -

Xuang Lee Zhang writes in his essay that the werewolf solved world hunger by eating everyone. But, then again, that meant that he was now very lonely. He wished someone would sing to him. No one could.

How the Giant Squid Made Me Stop Being Pregnant -

Kristi writes in her essay that a giant squid helped her get out of a tight situation when Danny Ramirez got her pregnant. She says that a squid told her that they'd take the baby from her and keep it in the ocean to become a mermaid with them. The squid squeezed her so tightly that the baby popped out like a little fish. They took it to the ocean and then Kristi went to Planned Parenthood and demanded to be put on birth control. The End.

How the Sphinx Solved the Problem of Loneliness -

Cody writes in his essay that while he was walking down the street a voice called out to him from the gutter. It was a Basilisk, and it asks him to solve a riddle. Then, Cody realizes that this is no ordinary Basilisk, but a Sphinx-Basilisk, a very rare creature. Because of his background and knowledge of Book IV of Engagement with Creatures of



Foul Darkness, he knows that the Basilisk is bound to answer his own riddle, which he poses to it. In parenthesis he tells Ms. Freedman that the answer is on the back of his paper. It reads: Janice Gibbs won't go out with me.

How the Vampire Resolved the Global AIDS Crisis -

Julie Chang writes in her essay that since Vampires live forever, they wouldn't die of AIDS. But then, she reasons, that would just mean that the disease could spread more, so perhaps the greater good would come from having sex education. She suggests that there be more sex awareness being taught, such as when she (Ms. Freedman) showed all of them how to put a condom on a banana, and took the time to explain what the difference was between an erection and a boner. Condoms will solve AIDS, she concludes.

How the Cephalopod Balanced the National Budget -

Andy Lopez states that he believes that Cephalopods ARE mystical creatures and that they would use calculators and wouldn't need Ms. Freedman to buy them school supplies. If the debt were balanced then she wouldn't have to be stressed out about not having books in the classroom, except the one called Reading is Fun from 1972 which no one likes, and she wouldn't have to bring her childhood books from her family's basement, only to have stupid people draw boobs and a penis on Black Beauty and make her cry. He assures her that it wasn't him, even though he wrote those letters to her a while ago.

How the Pegasus Created World Peace -

Amelia writes that she rode to school on the back of a Pegasus and world peace began at school. She preached the word of God and the Pegasus interpreted. Then, everyone began repenting, especially Angelica who made her swallow erasers in second period.

How the Succubus Got Me Laid -

Phil writes that he was viewing some choice pictures he'd ripped out of Playboy when the room began to shake. The Lego Princess turned into a succubus, which he recognized due to his comic book wisdom. She took nearly 90% of his life force, which is why he kept falling asleep in class the week before.

How the Wood-Nymph Saved the Environment -

Janice writes that the Wood Nymph would act like Ms. Freedman did when she brought in the cupcakes one day and Danny dissed them, saying that the icing looked like poop. She writes that the Nymph would be like Ms. Freedman, forgiving everyone for a thousand years before she just snapped. She would be like Ms. Freedman, taking all of the cupcakes back, turning the lights off, then sitting and eating all of them, wrappers and all. That makes the people on the planet begin to think that maybe they ought to change.



How My Dad Fixed the Lawnmower -

Adam states that he believes that his father is a mystical creature, mainly because his father died when he was three years old. And he would kick out Trent, his mom's new boyfriend, who is abusive, and fix anything that was broken. He would even find Ms. Freedman's diary that was stolen and that Danny hid under the dumpster.

How the Phoenix Got Ms. Freedman Out of Texas -

Laura writes that a Phoenix appeared at Ms. Freedman's window and Ms. Freedman scolded the bird because it was crushing her gardenias. She invited it in and offered it some refreshment, which it declined. Ms. Freedman stays that she's fixing dinner and doesn't need the Phoenix to be judgmental, that she is tired of hearing how she's making a difference and planting seeds that will take years to take root. She feels like an empty yogurt cup with a banana peel stuffed inside of it...useless, ineffectual, and non-recyclable. Then, the Phoenix steps onto the windowsill and Ms. Freedman climbs onto its back, and they both fly away.

Warm Greetings -

This section features a list of instructions and informative material from the Bridges Psychiatric Center. The center utilizes a points system where residents can earn points for exhibiting good behaviors and can use those points for rewards. Likewise, negative behaviors subtract wellness points. Ms. Laura Freedman has been admitted for a Bipolar Break with Consensus Reality and currently has a psychiatric credit score of 0.

The Un-Game -

This section opens up with a letter from Janice, one of Laura's students. She writes that Phil told everyone that he 'knocked' her up, but no one believes him. She says that at first she figured that maybe she had a drug problem and was in rehab. But, then, she used her critical reading skills (which she thanks Ms. Freedman for) and figured out that she must be in the looney bin. Janice tells Ms. Freedman in the letter that they all miss her very much and that they did appreciate all that she did, even if they never acted like it.

There is a substitute named Sir. He runs the classroom like a drill sergeant. Everyone hates him. Janice writes that she was promoted at the nursing home where she works. Instead of cleaning bedpans she was temporarily promoted to activities director where she decided to teach them to write Haiku. It didn't go so well and the idea of including some of them in the student newspaper at school was a bust. Janice writes that it would be nice to print some sort of poetry in the school newspaper that wasn't about suicide. She knows that Ms. Freedman knows about that since she was the sponsor for the paper when she was there.

Laura responds with a letter and says that she feels that she needs to explain to Janice what has happened. Ms. Freedman writes that ordinarily she takes pills that help to balance out her brain's chemistry, but in November she flushed them down the toilet.



Then, she'd imagined a Phoenix took her away. They found her in Arizona sitting on a park bench feeding hamburgers to birds in the park.

The medications have straightened things out, but she writes that she doesn't like the Wellness points system that they are insisting she engage in. She's being a very bad sport about it and doesn't want to play with clay in order to gain stupid points. She'd rather read her students' poetry, so if Janice wants to send more, please feel free. She has a lot of time on her hands.

Janice writes back that she is glad that the meds are straightened out. She said that when she was cleaning out the closet at the old folks home that she came upon a game stuck in the back of the supply closet called the 'Un Game'. The game with the old people was a bust as their answers were neither wise nor informative (at least in a good way). Janice writes that she thought that by the time people lived so long a certain amount of wisdom and kindness would be gained. Boy, she writes, was she wrong.

Laura writes back that they've changed her medications and that it scrambles her mind at times, then makes her extremely tired at others. She warns Janice against drinking and that it could mean that she won't ever be able to stop working at the old people's home.

Janice writes back that her father is being transferred to Kentucky. But he wants her to stay behind and live with her aunt. She says that her father told her that it was because he didn't want to take her out of school and make her leave her friends, but she writes that she knows it's because he has a girlfriend and that the new girlfriend doesn't want a kid around. Now she has to stay with her pregnant cousin in her room. She ends the letter with maybe it would be okay if she came and was Ms. Freedman's roommate at the looney bin. At least it would be quieter.

The last letter is written by Andrew Schaffer, the director of the center. It is addressed to Janice. It states that due to the type of therapy that Ms. Freedman is undergoing, outside communication is being temporarily suspended. All letters will henceforth be returned.

There is an email from Janice to Ms. Freedman. She writes that she knows that the stupid doctors wouldn't think about anyone's ability to check email and that if anyone was smart enough to manage to check mail, it would be Ms. Freedman. She asks what Ms. Freedman did to get put on lockdown. She worries about Ms. Freedman and thinks that she should try to leave there as soon as she can. She signs the email....your friend, Janice.

Janice writes again and states that the school has hired Sir full time now. She states that Danny asked her out and that she went out with him just to piss her father off. She writes that when he's alone without an audience that he's actually kind of nice. He thinks she is smart enough to be a doctor. She asks Ms. Freedman what she thinks. She also states that most likely Ms. Freedman isn't being allowed to read her email, either. Still, she just wanted to write anyway.



Before

The first section of Before opens up with a description from Bridges Wellness Center on what therapeutic journaling is. A prompt is offered. For answering the prompt, Laura will be given 10 Wellness points. Laura answers the prompt on where she was before being admitted to Bridges.

Laura writes that she got used to where she had been, the language of students who barely spoke English, who crossed the river with their parents, of the dead animals on the road, of the Churches on every corner, the Mexican influenced foods, and that she especially got used to the birds who flew around in all colors and in all types, squawking at her. Then she ends her essay with: Dr. Bin Ladin...I know you have my letters. Give. Them. To. Me.

I Have Borne Witness -

I Have Borne Witness is written in a mixture of third and second person from Janice's point of view. She has taken one of the nursing home residents out for a walk in the neighborhood. They go to the park and sit on the swings. There is an old grandmother in the park (Abuela) with her grandchildren. She is giving them grapes. Janice accepts one from her and they nod to one another. It is evident that Shirley, the nursing home resident, suffers from Alzheimer's.

There is a bracelet on Shirley's arm and thinking that it is a nice charm bracelet, Janice reaches out to see it. She asks Shirley about it, who doesn't know when she got it. Janice looks more closely and sees that it is a medical ID bracelet. It simply says Do Not Resuscitate. Janice tells her that it is beautiful and that it just has her name on it. Then, she gives one of her grapes to Shirley.

Analysis

In this initial section, the reader is introduced to some of Ms. Freedman's students. Through their essays one begins to gather information about Ms. Freedman, which is that she is a reading teacher, teaching in a low income school district. The books are outdated and there are no school supplies, so Ms. Freedman buys them for the students out of her own money. She brings in her old childhood books to share with them, which they defile and deface. She brings in cupcakes for the students, who ridicule her for it. When she feels that her students aren't getting the health education that she feels they need, she takes the time to show them how to use condoms, and they laugh through the entire thing.

The theme of The State of the Educational System is definitely introduced in this first section as the author shows that the poor teacher, Ms. Freedman, is having to use her own money to get supplies for the students, is forced to use substandard and outdated material in order to teach them, and that the overall education of the students (including sex ed) is lacking.



What one gains from this picture of Ms. Freedman is that she cares for her students but believes that she is swimming upstream and that in the end, nothing that she does or says makes a difference. She feels that her life has been wasted. She is not only despondent, but emotionally and spiritually empty. The theme of Freedom is introduced through the last essay entry, where Ms. Freedman climbs on the back of the Phoenix and flies away. The very spelling her last name FREEDMAN indicates a desire to be free.

The theft of her personal diary is perhaps one of the breaking points for her, as well as the cupcake incident. The diary, in and of itself, is symbolic of who she is as a person. When the students steal that, they steal her soul, and they literally and figuratively hide it under the dumpster behind the gym. Likewise, the metaphor for her emotional life is that of the empty yogurt cup with the banana peel stuffed inside...not even recyclable. She has hit rock bottom.

In the very short Warm Greetings section, the reader learns that Laura Freedman has been admitted to a psychiatric ward for a break down. She suffers from bipolar disorder and had stopped taking her medications. The theme of Mental Health is introduced in this section, and the way in which the doctors have made a 'game' of getting well seems to insinuate that their conditions are not being taken seriously and that the patients' mental health is one big joke.

In the UnGame, the reader learns more about Laura's breakdown. She'd been on bipolar medications before but had just decided to stop taking them in November. Then, she'd started to hallucinate and ended up in Arizona. This illustrates the theme of Mental Illness and how disjointed reality can become for those suffering from it. It also reiterates the need for those with permanent disorders to have a support structure in place and that treating them like children is both demoralizing and demeaning. Laura resents the Wellness Game and she is passively aggressive toward the entire thing.

From the letters from Janice, the reader sees that the students did really care for Laura Freedman, and that despite what she was thinking or feeling, she did matter to them very much. The theme of the Student/Teacher bond is explored in this section heavily, as the communication between Janice and Laura continues. Though she is the one receiving treatment, she still mentors and listens to Janice. It is clear that Laura is committed and deeply dedicated to what she has done for a living for so many years.

The symbolism of the Un Game indicates that asking deeply philosophical and ethical questions is not a game, any more than mental health is a game. Likewise, when the Bridges director cuts off all communication for Laura with the outside world, it makes Janice very worried for her. The theme of Misconception is introduced in Janice's information about what is going on at school since the principal has hired Sir full time as a teacher. Janice thought that all Reading teachers were supposed to be kind and understanding. Sir is not any of those.

In Before, the reader learns that Laura is still not leveled out with her medications as she references the 'birds' that squawk at her. These birds are really her students, as



they are described in such detail. Each bird is different, and she seems them as individuals, all needing someone to help them to fly. The reader also learns, through the many metaphors (animals dead on the road), that she had tried to become desensitized to the inhumane environment that she and her students lived in, and worked in, and that despite that, there was much beauty in the place where she'd come from.

This section demonstrates the theme of the State of Education in that the students have less than great home lives, and that the school is a reflection of the impoverished conditions in which most of them live. The theme of the Student/Teacher bond is shown at the very last when Laura demands that the letters from her student, Janice, be given to her. The reader now realizes that the essay offered at the beginning of the novel, *How the Phoenix Got Ms. Freedman Out of Texas*, was written by none other than Laura Freedman, herself.

I Have Borne Witness continues the theme of Misconceptions as Janice is shocked at the reality of old age. She believed that old people were almost all happy and wise, and satisfied with their retirement and how life has allowed them to slow down and do whatever they want. At 16 she is just beginning to understand, through working with the elderly, that this is not the truth or ever close to reality. Just because someone is old, doesn't mean that they are happy, kind, or wise.

The Grapes that are offered from the abuela on the playground to Janice are symbolic of the cultural understanding that the older take care of the younger, until it is time for the younger to take care of the older. Handing her the grape, and then Janice in turn handing a grape to Shirley, indicates this cycle of life.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the place where Ms. Freedman works.

Discussion Question 2

What were the series of events that landed Ms. Freedman in Bridges Wellness Center?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism evident in this section.

Vocabulary

mystical, sociopolitical, prompt, cognitive behavioral therapy, schizophrenia, envisioned, rehab, exquisite, Phoenix, confirmation, Haiku, simile, enjambment, exsanguination, fetal, emaciated, prefrontal cortex, complexity, stimuli



The Turnip, Nicoli, Today is my Birthday, Frankye, Recipes for Disaster

Summary

The Turnip -

This is another journaling entry by Laura at the Wellness Center. The topic asks about Laura's father. The beginning of the letter says: Fuck You, Bin Ladin. Then, she writes about her father, who had fought in Vietnam, then come home to open an auto body shop. On the side he dabbled in stocks and lost what savings the family had. It so unhinged Laura's mother that she hung herself in her garage. Laura had found her. She was four at the time.

Laura's father had thrown himself into the stock market full time, and eventually became decent at it. He once told Laura that God and religion was for the weak minded; that it is all just one big con to separate people from their money. He points out the poor Mexicans that work in the fields and how religious they are, which is why they are poor. It is a vicious cycle, he told her. He also told her that all of the poor should be sterilized. At age ten, she mentioned to her father that Hitler had the same idea and he told her that maybe Hitler was on to something.

She recalls and writes that her father used to like to stop and collect rocks along the road when they would take trips. He stopped and found a particularly shiny rock on one of their trips. He took it home and glued it to a backing, then threaded a chain through it and gave it to her for her birthday. She recalls that she kept that necklace until it became too tangled to wear any longer. In college she took pomegranates from their backyard that often sat in a big sack in the corner of her room, staining the floor and going moldy. Still, she told her father that they were loved by everyone.

Later, she told her father that she was tutoring inmates in the prison. He laughed derisively at her and said that people don't change. Many years later Laura's brother had driven down to Plano because their father had said that he was feeling very low. When Steven arrived he found that their father had, had a series of small strokes. They took turns watching him after this. She tried to discuss her new job in a dusty border town where she would hopefully change the lives of all of her students. Her father said that she was liberally brainwashed. Desperately, Laura looked for anything that would make him proud of her. She told him that the Walmart in the town where she would be going was the highest grossing Walmart. That impressed him.

Laura recalls a small story within the pages of Dostoevsky's larger work, The Brothers Karamazov, where a stingy woman (whose only act of charity in her whole life was to give an old turnip to a beggar) dies and is whisked off to hell. She begs for an angel to save her who extends the turnip to her. She grabs hold and miraculously is pulled from



the pits of hell. But before she can be fully clear of the flames, other souls grab hold of her feet and she kicks and thrashes at them to let go. The turnip breaks. They all go back to hell. Laura wonders if her father would be like the old woman, kicking at those who want to find a way out of hell, too. Probably, she writes.

Nicoli, who Was Thrown to the Wolves, 1874 -

This is the title of a poem that Janice wrote to Laura a few chapters previously. Laura had praised it and suggested that she have it printed in the school newspaper. However, Sir has taken over the school newspaper and rejects the poem saying that it wasn't a real poem because it didn't rhyme. The reader learns that Sir isn't a real reading teacher, but a PE coach that was thrown into the reading classroom to warm up the seat.

This entire section is a series of emails between Janice and her father, mother, and soon to be stepmother, Glenda. Janice insinuates that she is not doing well living with her aunt, that her grades have slipped, and that she is seeing Danny R, whom everyone knows is a womanizer. Her father responds and thinks that maybe she should come out to visit over the Christmas break and see if she likes it there, maybe even consider staying. The stepmother steps in and says that she checked on the grades from the school and that Janice is passing everything except PE, and that there is no Danny in the picture. She accuses her of manipulating Janice's father and threatens her. Janice retaliates with another email that basically states that she will forward the email to her father. Glenda responds and says that she checks all of his email for him and will simply delete them. She says that she did that to the letter that Janice's mother sent a while back.

Janice jumps on the information and states that if Glenda will give her her mother's email address that she will stop pushing to move in. Glenda readily agrees. Janice emails her mother and an entire soap opera unfolds. Glenda's former husband ran off with Janice's mother, and Glenda moved in with Janice's father. Now, Janice's mother has another child named Casey, who is 11 years old, and Janice's mother works at a casino in Reno. Janice asks if she can come and visit as she's saved up enough money for a bus ticket. The correspondence ends and Janice understands why her father told her mother to stay away.

Today is My Birthday -

Janice's birthday comes and no one thinks to celebrate it. Depressed she dials Danny's number. It is Halloween and there isn't any candy to hand out to the little kids that come to the door. She's glad when Danny offers to pick her up. He does and they go to his home where the entire front yard is decorated for the holiday. They go inside and watch movies for a while, drinking. Later, suitably drunk, Janice suggests they go into Danny's room. They have sex. Afterwards they are on the couch in the front room continuing to watch more movies when Danny's little brother comes into the room. He keeps saying, 'Da Moon'. He wants Danny to take him outside to look at the moon. Eventually Janice takes him out to see the moon. Everyone has gone home, and they stand there in the



moonlight together. She tells the toddler that it is her birthday, but all he says is, 'Da Moon'.

Frankye -

This writing prompt from the Bridges Wellness Center asks Laura to identify someone in her past that loved her unconditionally. Laura selects the next door neighbor whom she called Frankye. Frankye was an older woman that wore sweatpants and gold tennis shoes. She loved for Laura to come over to play. Simon, Frankye's husband, once asked her if she believed in Santa Claus and Laura had lied because innocence pleased adults. She told them the same thing about God.

Simon died a few years later and Laura started staying over at the house. She stayed all summer that summer and they would take walks in the park and go places. She was 14 at this point in time. Frankye would try to give her old clothes that were out of fashion, and Laura politely thanked her and took them to her own closet to hide. Frankye called Laura her best friend. They picked peaches, and talked about books. The years passed and Laura didn't spend as much time with Frankye as she used to. The older woman called to see if she would like to come over, but at age 17 Laura had college applications to fill out, or finals to study for, or anything but going over to the old woman's home. One time, humoring her, Laura had gone over for tea, just like she used to when she was little. Frankye told her that when she died that there was something for her in the clock on the wall.

Frankye died and the something in the clock amounted to \$5,000 dollars in cash. She also left her the doll collection and Laura asked for the button bucket. The lawyer who read the will agreed to it all. Laura read the eulogy at the funeral and didn't mess up. Then, afterwards, feeling horrible about the way she'd treated Frankye she contemplated the nature of her life and decided that she would now be friends with people she didn't even know, would help the helpless and champion the downtrodden. She would become a teacher.

Recipes for Disaster -

This is a cookbook produced by the 'good' women of Piggot, Ky, Glenda's home church. The first recipe is written by Glenda, herself. It is for BBQ meatballs. In the recipe she also offers helpful suggestions for dealing with stepdaughters and that in the end, one has to kill the meatball with kindness, stick a toothpick in it, and say a prayer. The next recipe is from Edna who confesses that her Brocomole Dip is better for everyone than Guacamole is, just like many of life's temptations (which she confesses to). Frances shares her recipe for Valley of the Shadow of Death Chocolate Cake. She says that while the cake is baking is a perfect time for sharing stories with the children about one's own childhood. She talks about how poor she was growing up on the farm and how during a bad winter they had to eat the horse and the dog.

The Pastor weighs in with his own recipe which is called Dark Night of the Soul Food. He says while stirring the ingredients together one should tear pages from one's



youthful diary and make snowflakes while contemplating where you lost your faith in man's ability to turn away from violence as well as God. Darla's recipe is called The Lord is My Shepherd's Pie. She talks about spousal abuse in her recipe essay. Effie, who is the church's secretary, offers a recipe for salad and talks about the ungrateful parishioners who berate the pastor and continue to ignore the plight of the poor in the area.

Neva's recipe is called Drinking Alone Cherry Soda, and features bourbon. Janice's Smothered Chicken Casserole is a farce since Glenda made her contribute the recipe. Minny's Easter Bunny Cake features wisdom about being a stay-at-home mom and being driven crazy by children. The Pastor has one more recipe. It is called Feeding the Multitude. In an act of rebellion against his church members he 'forgets' to cancel the homeless dinner which conflicted with Glenda and Janice's father's wedding reception. The homeless show up to eat everything at the buffet.

Analysis

In Turnip, the theme of Freedom is examined, as well as Mental Illness. The reader sees that Laura's mother suffered from, most likely, depression, and took her own life. She also alludes to the fact that her father may have had an obsessive compulsive disorder possibly from his time in Vietnam. Finding her mother dead when she was only four changed her and her brother forever.

Their father attempted to change the direction of all of their lives, but only ended up making Laura feel inadequate and useless for wanting to make things better for her fellow man. Her desire to help others was constantly met with ridicule. Laura mentions various times that throughout the years her father gave her: the necklace and the pomegranates. Using allusion, she references Dostoevsky's novel, The Brothers Karamazov, and likens her father to the old woman who had no compassion for her fellow man, and how it landed her in hell in the end. Though the small items throughout the years were nice, they were most definitely not enough to keep him from hell, she reasons.

The significance of the pomegranates is that they grew in their backyard, and had a tendency to split open and stain everything red. Laura is afraid that the 'stain' of her father's indifference will also become a part of who she is and she rails and works against that at all costs. She also references the rock necklace that he made for her, which is an act of love. She wore it close to her heart for a long time, until it became tangled and unwearable, she writes. This indicates that as a child, she accepted her father as he was, thought he was her hero, and didn't understand enough of the world to understand who he was. As she did begin to see him and form a frame of reference for who she was, the necklace became too knotted to wear and she saw him for who he was. She never wore the necklace again, indicating that she never quite looked at her father the same way any more.



The theme of Freedom is subtly hinted at in this section, as Laura's father clearly has no freedom. He is bound by his prejudices, insecurities, anger, and greed. His disregard for others has trapped him in a hell of his own making, from which he will never be freed, even in death.

In Nicoli, it is evident that Janice wants out of her current environment, and to be away from her family (all of them). She is also feeling very rejected all the way around, even at school when Sir refuses to include her poem. The theme of Freedom emerges through this entire section as it becomes evident that Janice wants nothing more than to just relieve herself of the burden of her family and their low expectations. The poem, itself, references being betrayed by both mother and father, and is often juxtaposed against images of comfort, closeness, and emotional support...something she definitely does not have from anyone but Laura Freedman.

Today is My Birthday offers a tragic symbol in Danny's little two year old brother, who asks to look at the moon. No one will take him out to look at the moon and eventually Janice does. They stand in the front yard, in the quiet inky darkness and look up at the moon. She tells him that it is her birthday and he says 'Da Moon'. In this section, the reader continues to see Janice's desire to leave her life behind. The moon becomes a symbol for the desire for freedom and for the innocence of youth to think that anything is possible. At two years of age, Danny's brother thinks that it is possible for anyone to reach the moon. At her current age, 17, Janice knows that it is not.

In Frankye the reader sees the relationship that Laura deems an unconditional one. Normally, people might be predicted to choose a parent or a relative, but Laura had a kindly neighbor woman who loved her as if she were her own child. Laura never appreciated it until Franye died. It was Frankye's influence that made Laura want to be a teacher and helped her regain her faith in people. Though it was not a formal teacher/student relationship, in many ways it was a mentor type of relationship. The theme of Student/Teacher bonds is evident in this section because of the influence that Frankye had on the direction of Laura's life.

Recipes for Disaster -

In a biting satirical section of the book, church members submit their recipes. Though they start out as recipes, with ingredients, the commentary that follows each recipe indicates the ugliness that is at the core of most of the cooks. Their hypocritical notions about life, love, living, and charity are shown to be warped and skewed. The despondent pastor, in an act of rebellion allows the homeless to come to the feast that will be the reception at the church. The homeless shelter has been shut down due to lack of funding, and yet he sees his church members arguing over what kind of SUV to buy, or which college to send their children to.

The theme of Misconception is thick in this section as the reader sees great use of irony as the parishioners discuss their backgrounds, the tragedies of their own lives, and how unhappy they are in the context of a recipe. The misconception is that church attendees



lead happier lives, but this section indicates that they are some of the most miserable lot to be found on the face of the planet.

Discussion Question 1

What is the purpose of the author's inclusion of the story, Turnip, from Dostoevsky's work?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of the moon in Today is My Birthday.

Discussion Question 3

What does the section, Recipes for Disaster suggest about the real life of the devout?

Vocabulary

complex, poetics, backlit, cicadas, blurry, asphalt, unconditionally, racket, synchronize, encircled, render, unraveling, humbly, swatches, multitude, plummage



Black Socketed, The Wormhole, The Holy Innocent, First the Sea, Mexico Foxtrot

Summary

Black Socketed, Blind -

This is another journaling entry whose prompt encourages Laura to write about her mother. Laura scoffs on paper about the prompt since her mother died when Laura was four. She says that she has very little memory and that what she does recall may or may not be a real memory, but rather something she was told about her mother. She lists what those are.

First, she recalls seeing her mother putting a sick chicken out of its misery by cutting off its head with an ax. She also remembers afterwards seeing her mother washing feathers and blood from her hands. Another memory is of her mother swinging her by the chubby arms around and around and the laughter, until she hit her ankle on a tree. She recalls her mother having a migraine so bad that she had to cover the windows with towels and stuff rags under the door so that it would be dark enough.

Another memory is of her mother stooped over the toilet seat inhaling chemicals. Then there was the memory of the letters that were written to her while her mother was in the hospital, about wanting to gouge out her eyes and wandering black socketed and blind, and that what was dead would never rise again. She also remembers the day her mother came back from the hospital, dazed and unresponsive.

Then, there was the memory, she writes, of her mother lying down on the sidewalk talking to herself while Laura danced around a tree with a stick. And of course, finding her mother hung in the garage. She also notes that her mother may or may not have appeared to her on a window sill and told her to leave before she was destroyed.

The Wormhole -

This section is a collection of emails and letters sent back and forth between Cody and Janice. Cody is trying to patronize Janice in an attempt to get his stories published in the Giraffe, the student newspaper. Janice caustically writes back that Cody's work sucks and that he should send his stuff to the official editors since she is no longer in charge.

Cody responds back that Janice is only out for a week for fighting. He writes 'who knew how much that girl would bleed'. Attacking someone with scissors in a bathroom nets Janice one full week's suspension. Cody writes again and asks if there's anything he can do for her while she's out of school, and why hasn't she come back since it's been



more than a week. Janice replies that unless Cody can make a time machine and she can go back and forget to meet Danny R, then no, there's nothing he can do. She tells Cody that Danny, big shocker, she says, has gotten her pregnant. Cody writes back that in order to make a time machine work one would have to have a wormhole...which aren't that easy to make. Instead, he could just drive her down to Planned Parenthood. Janice agrees and they make plans.

The Holy Innocent -

This section chronicles the series of events that led to Janice's miscarriage. She starved herself, hoping that this might happen. Then, while she was working at the nursing home the cramps began. Janice recalls a conversation that she'd had with one of the nuns at the church about where dead babies go. The nun had said that they become attendants to the Holy Innocent. However, Janice finds that despite being rid of the unwanted pregnancy, she misses the little life that never had a chance.

First, the Sea Gave Up Her Dead -

This is another journaling prompt concerning the last dream that Laura has had. Laura writes that she dreamed that the sea gave up her dead. They pulled up the bodies in large nets, but then it became evident that the earth was swelling up and spitting up the bodies too fast to do anything with. The earth was tired of the poison of men planted in her chest. She says that she grew breasts and started to bleed, and then the people in the village tied a note around her with a list of their sins and told her that she was to speak to God for them. But God didn't listen, and then the trees joined hands with the dead and they went to stand before God who called out Sheeps and Goats. The trees knew that they were good but the people were just confused. But it was always a trick question, because all were welcome there. Time was no more.

Mexico Foxtrot Rides Again -

Cody writes to Janice and tells her that they must rescue Ms. F from Bridges Wellness Center. He asks if she's up for a road trip. Janice writes back that Cody needs to stop writing emails all in caps. But since she's thinking about it, it has been over a year since she's heard anything from Laura. She agrees.

On the road trip over Cody notices that Janice is very thin. He also learns that she has been fired for smoking the residents' cigarettes at the nursing home, and that at least once she took some of their medications. She is also still seeing Danny. Cody asks her why she is throwing her life away. He's going to college in the fall, and Janice just lights up another cigarette.

They arrive at the Wellness Center and sign in. Cody signs in as Mexico Foxtrot. They find Ms. Freedman who is quite clearly indoctrinated, but still rebelling against the program. They convince her to go along with their plan and just as they are about to get away with it, the orderly catches on. Laura manages to get out to the car and drive off, leaving the two kids alone with Dr. Weir. Janice and Cody ask for lawyers, but the doctor



just laughs and says that they don't get lawyers as they have been checked in now as patients.

Dr. Weir tells them that he is extremely upset with them as Ms. F was part of a medical trial and that the pharmaceutical company will be very upset. They need a replacement for her...and guess what, he says, Janice is now going to be called Laura Freedman. Cody says that their parents will come looking for them.

The door bursts open and Ms. Freedman is standing in the doorway with an X-Acto knife. Ms. F takes the syringe from the orderly plunges it into his thigh, then holds another needle to Dr. Weir's throat. She doses him and watches him fall to the floor. She cuts the kids' bonds and they leave. The kids agree to take her to her brother's apartment in Austin. Janice reveals to Cody that she has Ms. F's journal, that she took it from Danny. Cody asks why she didn't give it back to her. She says that it doesn't matter any more...that was who she was...not who she is.

In an a final note, Janice writes an email to Cody stating that his 'embellishment' of the jail break was exciting, but not entirely accurate. When they arrived they were told that Ms. F was due to be released in a couple of weeks. Then they met with her, ate at a Burger King, and then they drove her to her brother's apartment for a visit. She says while Cody's story was more interesting, it wasn't entirely true.

Analysis

Blind Socketed, Blind offers the reader another glimpse into Laura's childhood and her inner landscape as regards her own sanity. She was only four when her mother died, but it is clear that the picture of her mother that one sees from this section is that her mother was also most likely suffering from depression or bipolar disorder, too. The theme of Mental Illness is touched upon in this section as Laura's mother is medicated beyond her ability to function, instead of the underlying problems being treated at all. As a result, it destroyed her.

The motif of the bird is evident in this particular section as Laura states that her mother appeared to her as a brightly-plumaged bird and sat on her windowsill and told her to leave before she was destroyed. This is another reference to freedom and the threat of its loss.

The Wormhole is a series of emails and letters between Cody and Janice where the reader learns that Janice's life, after the marriage of her father and Glenda, have gone downhill. She's cut her hair, started to wear edgy clothing, her grades have been dropping, and then the reader learns that Janice is pregnant by Danny Ramirez.

In The Holy Innocent the baby represents the possibilities that Janice has. Unlike many of the girls in her town, Janice had the very real possibility of getting out, of going to college. When her body rejects the baby and Janice has a miscarriage, she is relieved, but also saddened. She doesn't understand why she should be sad, but symbolically, she's made the decision to take the easier road instead of the harder road that would



lead to her getting out of the cycle of poverty. She's literally starved and killed the potential of a new life.

In *The Sea Gave Up Her Dead*, the reader sees the dreamscape of Laura's mind. In it there are direct references and metaphors to the things that bother her the most in her awake life. She feels as if she has had to become the 'sin eater' for the human race, for her students. Additionally, she believes that people have been sold a bill of goods for how to behave, when in the end, everyone is welcome in heaven. The problems in her past have risen, like the dead, and have come out of the sea of her consciousness to be confronted. In the last portion of this dream, she makes her peace with all of them.

Mexico Foxtrot Rides Again chronicles the fanciful retelling of Cody and Janice's 'rescue' of Laura Freedman from the Bridges Asylum. What comes from this story is that they both deeply care about their former teacher. For Laura it is validating that her time as a teacher did matter, and that she did make a difference.

Discussion Question 1

What is learned through the entry titled *The Wormhole*?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Janice's miscarried baby in *The Holy Innocent*?

Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Janice give Ms. F back her diary?

Vocabulary

conspiracy, skeptical, lobotomy, fizzy, emerged, supple, extinguished, diazepam, veering, rancid, obscured, array, morse code, donned, fedora, jacuzzi, capitalist



Their Trunks, Virtue of the Month, Elephants Never Forget, Uncommon Happiness, In the Hall

Summary

Their Trunks Were Their Handles -

Several years have passed. Janice is in jail. She stole money from the store where she was a cashier. Addicted to pain pills, she talks with the other women in the holding cell. Janice is beginning to go through withdrawal. She goes to the toilet to throw up and someone has taped a biblical bookmark to the lid. It reads:

"Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value then they?" Janice sinks to the ground. She prays for an angel to intervene. Someone comes and lifts her over his shoulder and carries her out of the cell. She blacks out.

Virtue of the Month -

This chapter focuses on Laura's timeline. It is clear that she has remained outside of Bridges and now has a significant other named, Ben. They are in his pickup truck traveling to Laura's father's house. They pass a church that declares that the virtue of the month is 'honesty'. As they've been traveling she has been thinking more about what she does actually remember about her mother. Her mother's younger brother had had an epileptic seizure and fallen into a well when her mother, Olivia, was only 17.

They reach Laura's father's home in Plano. She and Ben are cleaning it out, getting it ready to be sold. Six months prior, Laura's father died. As Laura cleans and packs away her father's things, she recalls that her mother said that her own mother had blamed Olivia for her younger brother's death. When she was 18, Olivia moved out and got a job as a secretary. Many years later, the same mother had called for Olivia to come to her deathbed as she wished to make peace. Before she could make the trip, Olivia had a severe migraine that landed her in the bed for three days straight. When she was better, her mother had died.

Elephants Never Forget -

This section focuses on Janice. She's attending a community college in Kentucky and has put her life back on course. This chapter is told in a series of emails to Cody, who has become a famous author. Janice says that when she was 'rescued' from jail, she stayed at a halfway house and had nothing better to do than read. She pulled out Ms. Freedman's old journal and it inspired her to track down what had been happening with old classmates.



Julie Chang died in Iraq, Kristi drank lysol and damaged her kidneys, Phil went to jail, and at that point, Janice writes, she stopped reading to tell Ms. Freedman that she failed. Then she read further and there was a bible verse that said: The clay does not ask the potter: what are you making?. Then, she tells Cody, she decided that she should just swallow her pride and ask Glenda to wire money so she could come home. And that's what she did.

There is a knock on Janice's door (in the present, in Ky). She answers and it is Cody, dressed in a suit of armor, riding a horse. There are TV cameras. Cody asks her to marry him on live TV. Janice screams and slams the door. She tells him no and Cody rides off. Janice emails Cody to apologize, but he doesn't respond. Ms. Freedman emails Janice to thank her for coming to her wedding, and to tell her that she is three months pregnant. They are tapering off her meds and it is rough. Janice misses Cody.

Uncommon Happiness -

Laura writes that she has started a blog called 'Uncommon Happiness'. The reader learns that she is working freelance tutoring and writing gigs in the city while waiting for the birth of her first child. She hates some of the work, but likes the flexibility that it offers her. She would rather be working with the underprivileged but her medications are expensive and she can't afford to help.

People write to Laura from her blog and she gives them advice if she feels she has anything to contribute. Most of the posts concern marital problems or medical issues, which she weighs in on. For the most part, it is evident that Laura is still in the business of guiding and helping people. One of the regular posters states that she experienced a moment of grace when she read The Brothers Karamazov. Laura responds with: We all know loving one another is the whole goddamn point of this human condition.

In the Hall of Old Testament Miracles -

This is a story written by Cody. In the story, he and Janice break into the Wax Museum at night. The mannequins come alive and various bible characters begin to try and kill them. Cody is injured and when they jump into a janitor's closet to wait for the dawn, Janice realizes that Cody is bleeding. He tells her that he loves her. She goes for help and arrives riding a white unicorn. She saves him and he leaps on the Unicorn and they ride away.

Analysis

In Their Trunks Were Their Handles, Janice is suffering from her life's choices. Though she tells the reader that she had no choice in the actions that she's taken, it is clear that she has always had choices, but that most of her motivation has been to 'get back' at someone, to punish the 'other'. Her feelings of self worth are in the toilet.

The symbolism of the birds resurfaces with the bible verse that is, ironically, taped to the toilet lid. The verse asks Janice to consider her worth, and that she is worth at least as



much as a bird. Through Janice's reaction to the verse it is clear to the reader that Janice has hit rock bottom.

Virtue of the Month revolves around honesty. While cleaning out her father's home to be sold, Ben reads Laura's new journal that she's started. She's been keeping it from him that she's on anti-psychotic meds. Now he knows. Other points of honesty include dealing with her mother's death. Being in the same house she is able to take a stark and brutal look at what her mother did and how she might end up like her mother.

Elephants Never Forget -

Through Laura's old journal she is still reaching Janice. They have remained friends and they continue to email one another as well. However, many of the other students have not fared so well, bringing back the theme of the State of the Educational System. Most of them dropped out of school. The school continued to be a warehouse for young adults, mandated by the state, but not maintained by the state with any regularity. As a result, the students that were turned out by the school became as broken and in need of repair as the buildings.

The Student/Teacher bond is still alive and well, not only through Laura's diary, but also through emails and communication between Laura and Janice. However, Janice is still suffering from low self esteem and doesn't believe herself worthy of having a relationship with anyone. She views herself as 'damaged goods'.

Uncommon Happiness chronicles Laura's continuation of aid to mankind in general. She has had to face the reality that she can't afford to help the poor for a living, but, in turn, she can still do some good in the world. Having to wean herself off of her meds for the baby's sake has been difficult and the reader can tell from the jumbled tangle of words in each progressive post that the lack of medication is beginning to affect her. However, she also has many inspired thoughts and insights which flow through her mind-fog onto the blog page.

The theme of Student/Teacher bond shines through with the frequent posters that she comes to know. She doesn't pretend to have all of the answers, but she does provide an honest outsider's opinion on various questions posed. There is another allusion to the Dostoevsky novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* with one reader, who realizes that love is an undercurrent that is always there, even if one doesn't always tap into it. Laura agrees.

In the Hall of Old Testament Miracles is a story written by Cody, but ostensibly suggests that he continued to get to know Janice and that she finally agreed to loving him back. The use of old testament characters, especially referencing Goliath and his fall, all suggest that insurmountable odds will be overcome.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss what Laura has been doing with her life since she left Bridges.



Discussion Question 2

What social commentary is the author making about the state of the world in the section titled, Uncommon Happiness?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Student/Teacher bond throughout this section.

Vocabulary

triumvirate, undulation, manikin, proffered, broadsword, collective, flailed, staggering, martyr, barrage, patriarch, tidal, homicidally, splinter, militia, bayonet, loomed, hobbled, nickered, shattered



Faux Rose, Hurry Up, Resurrection Snow Globe, Like the Russian Said, The Apple

Summary

Faux Rose

This chronicles the birth of Laura's child, Rose. After the baby is born, Laura refuses to be parted from her, even though it is evident that she is exhausted. The nurse is concerned that the baby might not be getting enough milk. The next day Ben arrives and can tell that the lack of meds mixed with baby hormones are dangerously close to sending Laura over the edge. He calls the nurse who gives Laura a shot of something and she goes to sleep. When she wakes up they bring the baby to her and she screams that this baby is not her Rose. Ben tries to tell her that it IS Rose, but Laura won't hear about it and begins to rant. They give her more drugs and knock her out. The psychiatrist is called in and they tell Ben, with Laura overhearing, that breastfeeding is not going to be possible as Laura needs to be back on her medications.

They put her back on medications but Laura is consumed with the thought that someone has stolen Rose. Ben arrives and tells her that he's been bottle feeding Rose. Faux Rose, Laura calls the baby that Ben holds. Ben looks sad and says that this is a nightmare. It is decided that Laura needs to be institutionalized for a few weeks to get her body back on the anti-psychotic meds. Ben takes the baby home. In a few days he comes to visit and brings the baby, but Laura states that when she looks at Faux Rose, she has no feelings for it at all.

She is sent home, but through a fog she still can't feel anything for the baby. When she takes the trash out to the dumpster she wonders if she slid the Faux Rose into the dumpster if the real Rose would return.

Hurry Up Please, It's Time -

This section is told from the viewpoint of Ben, in second person. Laura seems better and Ben relaxes. Then, one day when he comes home from work, both Laura and the baby are gone. Terrified Ben starts searching for them. Two days later the police tell Ben that they've found the baby in a gas station bathroom, but there is no sign of Laura. Ben starts putting up fliers. Janice arrives and hands Ben Laura's old journal. He sets it aside.

He takes the baby out for a ride in the stroller but everywhere he walks he thinks of the time he spent with Laura. He misses her and it is like a raw wound. As he is making his way back to the house he sees Janice sleeping in her car. He knocks on the window



and offers her their spare bedroom. Janice accepts. She offers to watch Rose while Ben gets some sleep, but Ben says that he can't sleep. Janice tells him to read the journal, then, that it might give him a clue as to where she might be.

Resurrection Snow Globe -

This section is Laura's old journal as it is being read by Ben. She began the journal on her first day of work at the school. After her first week she says to a friend of hers that what she is being asked to do is not teaching, it is rote memorization and worksheet completion. She's told that at least it is a job. Laura writes that she feels her soul starting to fray.

Another entry states that the principal was upset with her because she failed to follow the procedures for a lockdown drill, in case of a gunman. She writes that she didn't realize that she was teaching in a war zone. Several weeks pass and it is clear from the entries that Laura is becoming disenchanted. She is so tired all of the time and wonders if it might be her medication that is slowing her down. Maybe she should stop taking it, she writes. Laura's roommate gives her a snow globe to commemorate a rite of passage for Laura as a teacher: her first pregnant student.

The music teacher becomes her new lover. She writes that now she is on fire with ideas, but it is not because of Philip. The pink pills were holding her back. Now that they are gone, she is free. Thanksgiving break comes and Laura is left alone. Philip goes to California to see family and ends up getting back together with his girlfriend. Laura downward spirals. She writes: There is pride in expecting too much from my stunted heart. She makes cupcakes for her students. It is a bad idea.

Like the Russian Said -

This chapters cuts to the present and is written from Laura's viewpoint. She has already abandoned the baby at the gas station and is walking through a cemetery looking for her mother's grave. She finds the grave because the ghost of her mother is sitting on the headstone, smoking a cigarette. Her mother asks her how she wants to do it. Laura asks her what she's talking about. Her mother says... 'you know...kill yourself'. Her mother's ghost suggests that she go into her father's house which is still up for sale, and take care of business there.

Laura goes to her father's house, and drives into the garage, shutting the door behind her. The car is still running. Her mother comforts her and says that she's doing everyone a favor, that Ben's life will be better without her. Laura closes her eyes.

The Apple -

In this section, Laura imagines that now she is the peasant woman from Dostoevsky's novel. She remembers offering Janice an apple in the cafeteria once, and then, magically, the very apple is extended by the hand of an angel, who pulls her out of hell. When she looks down she sees so many others holding on to her ankles, following her



out of hell. Instead of reacting as the peasant woman had, kicking the others free of her, Laura lets them hold on. And, in the end, they are all offered mercy.

Analysis

In *Faux Rose* the theme of Mental Illness is brought up again in full force. Having been off of her medications for a full nine months, Laura is suffering a relapse. She is convinced that the baby that the hospital has handed her is not the baby she gave birth to. Thus, she calls the baby, Faux Rose. This illustrates with grim reality the difficulties that those with mental disorders suffer in seemingly usual and normal life events, such as the birth of a child. Likewise, being off of the medication has also caused her marriage to become rockier as her mood swings and unpredictable behavior are taking their toll on Ben.

In *Hurry Up Please, It's Time*, the reader sees the devastating consequences of mental illness to the family members who must deal with it as well. The theme of Mental Illness offers a stark look into the life of Ben, his family, Janice, and other friends who frantically try to find Laura. Interestingly enough, Janice is the only one that still seems to have any optimism. By handing Ben Laura's old journal, she is symbolically giving him his wife back, though he does not realize it at the time.

Resurrection Snow Globe -

The themes of Mental Illness as well as the State of the Educational System are addressed in this section. It not only chronicles the disillusionment that Laura suffers when she realizes that she has not really been hired to educate, but to fulfill mandates by the state, which include doing rote memorization and worksheets so that the students will pass the standardized tests. This commentary suggests that the educational system is very broken and is as mentally ill as Laura is at this point in time.

When Laura goes off of her medication, the waves of mental disjointedness rise just as the waters and tides do with a hurricane that blows through the area. She feels as if she is in over her head, drowning and no one cares. Her students certainly don't care, and she knows that there is nothing that she is doing that is making the slightest bit of difference to them.

The breakup over Thanksgiving (and the sense of betrayal and rejection) are compounded when she makes cupcakes for the students and they make fun of them. Then, when she learns that one of her students is pregnant, and receives a mocking award from Philip, her sense of impotency seems infinite.

Like the Russian Said -

The title is a reference to an old Russian saying that eventually the gun on the mantle goes off. In this section the theme of Mental Illness is broadened and gives the reader insight into the faulty reasoning that goes on in the mind of someone suffering from



mental illness. She believes herself so damaged and nonredeemable that suicide is rationalized as a kindness.

The Apple -

In this section, Laura hallucinates and believes that she has been saved from hell by the apple that she extended to Janice many years ago. A simple gesture of kindness has saved her soul. The symbolic nature of the gesture, and the allusion to The Brother's Karamazov, bring with them an entire chain of 'souls' holding on to her. She looks down and sees her mother choked with rose vines, her father weighted down with rock necklaces, and many of the broken individuals she's come across throughout her life. However, she is different from the peasant woman from the original story. She does not cut them loose, or kick them away...she accepts them and yearns, in her last moments, to save them. And in doing so, saves herself. This ends the book, so the reader is left to extrapolate what actually happened to Laura. Whether she killed herself or she changed her mind at the end is left up to the reader to decide.

Discussion Question 1

Why did the author include the novel, The Brothers Karamazov?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Mental Illness as it is expressed throughout the novel.

Discussion Question 3

What disheartening conclusion about the teaching profession does Laura come to after less than a year of teaching?

Vocabulary

simulacrum, undocumented, Aryan, perpetuates, Sodomites, gouge, anti-authoritarian, overcompensate, scurvy, perturbed, burliest, russet, lithium, subcutaneous, tochtotchke



Characters

Ms. Laura Freedman

Laura Freedman is a young woman who has been a teacher for a number of years in a small dusty border town in Texas. She decides, for reasons only known to her, that it would be a great idea to stop taking her bipolar medication in November. She experiences a nervous breakdown and has to be institutionalized for a time. While there, she must deal with her own journey toward healing as well as discover and deal with some of her deepest held secret wounds.

Laura is a very sensitive, educated English teacher, whom the reader learns was always altruistic. She found her mother dead in the garage (she hung herself) when Laura was four. Diagnosed at some point with bipolar disorder, Laura managed her disorder quite well for many years.

Her relationship with her father was distant and rocky. He was a bitter, ultra conservative, atheist, and she was a liberal do-gooder new age personality. When she was younger she treasured his gifts and the things that he said. But as she began to grow older and wiser, she was able to see her father for the individual that he was and became disenchanted by him. She understood why her mother felt trapped to the point where she had to kill herself.

Laura is shown to be a loving, caring, committed, and dedicated teacher in a circumstance where the administration did not support her, the district could not, or would not, give the school the necessary supplies and text books, and where the level of poverty that confronted her students on a daily basis made learning nearly impossible. Still, she managed, somehow, to reach more of the students than she thought, as evidence by Janice's correspondence with her.

Sir

Sir is the substitute teacher that they bring in to take Laura's place. He is her complete opposite, regimenting everything and running the classroom like an army barracks. Janice tells Mrs. F that the students all hate him and that they want her to come back soon.

Sir is hired full time by the principal after it is learned that Laura will be out for the rest of the year. Sir punishes Danny and other rule breakers by making them do pushups. He is not a reading teacher like Mrs. F had been, but was a gym coach that they hired to fill the position.



Dr. Sherman Weir

Dr. Weir started the Wellness Center and the Wellness Point Game that Laura is forced to take part in. He started the Bridges Wellness Center when his own son was diagnosed with Schizophrenia.

Janice

Janice is a major secondary character. She typifies many of the students in the area who are bright but are surrounded by such circumstances that it is virtually impossible for them to break free of it.

She is the first student to correspond with Laura and keeps her updated on what is going on at the school. She also shares her poetry with Mrs. F and also confides things from her ongoing life with her. When they send word that they will no longer allow Janice's letters to come through, due to the type of therapy that Laura is on, Janice switches to emails, thinking that they won't monitor those as closely. She is wrong. However, she continues to try to write emails to her, hoping that one day Mrs. F will read them.

Janice's home life is terrible. Her mother ran off with her father's best friend, and then her dad married his best friend's wife. It is a soap opera of a mess, she writes. Her father has left to find work in Ky and has left Janice behind to live with her aunt, whom she despises. Janice angles to make it so that her father will feel guilty enough to bring her out to Ky to live, but Glenda, her step mother, gets wind of it and shuts down that notion.

Janice briefly reconnects with her mother, who has another child and is living in Reno where she works at a casino. After a couple of emails, Janice's mother quits emailing her back. Janice, depressed and angry about the lack of connection with anyone or anything, decides to have sex with Danny, a boy that is notorious for his promiscuity. Janice wants to be a doctor or something along those lines, but doubts that someone like her will ever have the chance. She currently works at a nursing home where she helps take care of the patients.

Danny

Danny Ramirez is another one of Laura's students. He is part of a very large Hispanic family living in the area. It is evident that his family are loud and boisterous, but that there are so many of them that most of the kids end up raising themselves.

Danny is evidently into drugs, alcohol, pornography, and sex. He is into self gratification at all costs and sees no good reason for going to school. He currently goes to school because he has nothing better to do. He has sex with most of the girls at school, even getting one girl, Kristi, pregnant.



Kristi

Kristi is the girl that writes the essay about a giant squid saving her from being pregnant. In a highly metaphorical essay she writes about the abortion that she has because Danny has gotten her pregnant. It is because of this pregnancy that Mrs. Freedman feels compelled to have an impromptu sex ed class for the kids.

Andy

Andy writes an essay and suggests that while he has feelings for Mrs. F, he would never take her diary or do anything horrible with the knowledge.

Phil

Phil tells everyone that he knocked up Ms. Freedman and that this is why she is not at school. Everyone knows he is lying though.

Steven

Steven is Laura's older brother. He distanced himself from their father long ago, but returns to help Laura watch over their father after their father has a series of strokes.

Janice's Father

Janice's father seems to be a very loving father, kind and concerned. However, he also is very lonely and hurt from his former wife's actions. Though he has told Janice what happened, Janice has always thought that some parts of the story might be exaggerated. However, after Janice reconnects with her mother she suspects that all of her father's stories were completely accurate.

Janice's father is dating Glenda and is planning to marry her. Glenda is very protective of Janice's father and suspects that Janice is trying to manipulate him into bringing her out to Ky.

Janice's Mother

Janice's mother ran away with Janice's father's best friend. They toured the country as a sort of musical group until he developed a cocaine addiction and was arrested. Already pregnant, Janice's mother has another daughter, named Casey. They live in Reno. She says all of the right things at first, when Janice locates her via email. However, later, it becomes evident that she's still quite irresponsible and doesn't really have a true emotional investment in Janice at all.



Glenda

Glenda is Janice's father's fiancée. They moved to Ky together when the Smucker's Plant shut down in Texas. Janice suspects that it was Glenda's suggestion that they leave Janice behind.

Glenda attends church and often uses it as her reason for doing what she does, including passively aggressively 'forgiving' Janice for all of the times she tormented her when they were all in Texas. She threatens Janice if she should try and come to Ky, and then calls Janice's bluff when it is evident that Janice is trying to guilt her father into bringing her to Ky. Eventually, they call a truce when Janice learns that Glenda has Janice's real mother's address.

Casey

Casey is Janice's 11-year-old sister whom she's never met. She lives in Reno with their mother.

Danny's 2-Year-Old Brother

Danny Ramirez's little brother likes to look at the moon. On Halloween he asks Danny to take him out to look at the moon but he won't. Janice does, instead.

Shirley

Shirley is one of the residents at the nursing home that Janice spends time with. She takes Shirley to the park one day and a grandmother with her grandchildren gives them grapes.

Cody

Cody initially wrote the essay titled How the Sphinx Solved the Problem of Loneliness and stated how he was in love with Janice Gibbs, who didn't even know he existed. However, midway through the novel he shows himself to be a true friend to Janice, offering to drive her to Planned Parenthood for an abortion, and then enlisting her help to go and 'break' Ms. F from Bridges. He is bright and has been accepted into a college.



Symbols and Symbolism

Yogurt Container

In the Attack of the Mystical Creatures section, the last essay speaks about how Ms. Freedman feels emotionally at the time. She compares herself to an empty yogurt cup with a banana peel stuffed inside. Empty and not recyclable.

Phoenix Bird

In the last essay that is offered under Attack of the Mystical Creatures section, Laura writes that a Phoenix bird comes to take her away. In mythology the Phoenix traditionally rises out of the ashes to be reborn. Therefore, this bird represents Laura's attempt to remake herself, to be reborn. Interestingly enough, there is a running motif revolving around birds throughout the entire novel, and it begins with the appearance of the Phoenix bird.

Laura's Diary

One of the last straws that pushes Ms. Freedman over the edge is that her personal diary is stolen out of her briefcase. Danny hides it under the dumpster behind the gym class. Since the diary is very personal, it represents Laura, herself. This violation of who she is as a person, the demoralizing way in which it is relegated to beneath the dumpster, makes her feel unwanted, unwelcomed, and it makes her believe that her time there as been a complete and utter failure.

UnGame

This is a game that Janice finds in the storage closet at the Nursing Home. It is a game that poses moral or ethical questions to the players. Janice plays it with the patients and residents, but finds that the wisdom that she thought they would share is all one large misconception on her part. Just because one is old and has a lot of life experience, doesn't necessarily guarantee wisdom.

Birds

Throughout the novel the motif of birds appears. First, the appearance of the Phoenix in Laura's essay, then later they appear when she is asked to describe where she lives. Laura often uses the metaphor of birds to describe the students that she works with, and has worked with, and compares them all to caged birds, never to know the joyfulness of flight.



Grapes

When Janice takes Shirley, a resident from the nursing home, to the park for an outing, they notice an older woman there with her grandchildren. She is offering her grandchildren grapes as a snack and she brings some over for Janice and Shirley. The grapes represent the cycle of care, old to young, young to older as time progresses. In handing the grapes to Janice, the older woman is acknowledging and passing along the torch to the younger generation.

Rock Necklace

When Laura was younger her father would collect rocks from different places that they would travel to on vacation and so forth. One time he found a particularly nice stone and had it made into a necklace. He gave it to her for one of her birthdays and she wore it close to her heart. However, as she grew older, the necklace became unwearable, even looking slightly ugly to her.

With this metaphor, the necklace represents the image that she held for her father when she was younger. As she aged, she began to notice that her father's opinions were very limiting and even heartless.

Pomegranates

In Laura's backyard there was a pomegranate tree. When she left to go to college her father sent along a bag full of the fruits for her and the other students. They sat in the corner of Laura's dorm room, staining the floor and molding. This is a metaphor for her father's ideology and her rejection of it. She recognized its ability to permanently stain her soul if she should embrace it. This is also a nod, in some respects, to the Greek story of Persephone in the Underworld, where Persephone ate a pomegranate seed while in the underworld and as a result was relegated to living there half of every year. Laura does not want that sort of captured and confining life for herself.

The Moon

In the section titled, Today is My Birthday, Janice goes to Danny's home. It is Halloween, and Janice's Birthday. Danny's little brother, who is two years old, loves to look at the moon. Janice takes him to see it when no one else will. The moon represents the dreams and aspirations that people in Janice's world have, and that the young figure they are attainable, while the older people know that they are most likely not.



Janice's Miscarriage

The baby represents the chance that she had a new life, literally. When she loses the baby, it is her body's way of rejecting that reality and that way of life. Later, she finds herself wishing for a different life, a life that might have been. The reader should not confuse the metaphor for Janice's real desire for a child, which is not the case. She desires a different life, a new life, from that of the others around her.



Settings

Texas

The entire novel takes place in a border town in Texas. The town, which is never named, is very impoverished and populated for the most part by immigrants.

School

The school where Laura teaches is in a very small and impoverished border town in Texas. They don't have money for current textbooks, supplies, and most often have high drop out and pregnancy rates. This is where much of the earlier action takes place. Janice continues to keep Ms. F updated on the happenings there.

Phoenix Arizona

This is where Laura ends up when she has her episode. They find her sitting on a park bench in Arizona feeding pigeons hamburgers.

Bridges Wellness Center

This is the psychiatric hospital where Laura Freedman is sent. They have an 'innovative' program which they call the Wellness Game, where patients must earn points for engaging in positive behavioral activities. Laura hates being manipulated and reacts badly to their insistence that she play the game.

Elysian Fields Nursing Home

An ironic title, the nursing home is neither reward nor paradise for the residents there. Janice works there after school as the temporary activities director. It is clear that she cares for the residents living there.



Themes and Motifs

Mental Illness

In this novel the theme of Mental Illness is the prevailing theme. The ongoing 'legacy' of mental illness is shown to have started, as far as the story allows, as far back as both of Laura's parents, most notably her mother.

Laura's mother hung herself after a long struggle with mental illness and many misdiagnosed disorders. Laura, only four years old, found her mother hanging in the garage. This set the stage for Laura's onset later in life.

Additionally, mental illness is shown to be treatable and that with proper diagnosis and maintenance is manageable and those who have many of the disorders can go on to lead completely normal lives.

The use of the Bridges Asylum suggests that many health care providers see mental health as a lesser medical issue and as such don't give it the full attention or gravity that it needs in order to further the research. Treated as if it is a 'game' and a 'choice' for many of the patients, just like in the novel, it is ludicrous to believe that patients can simply make themselves better with cognitive behavioral therapy alone.

State of the Educational System

From the first chapters it is easy to see that the school system where Laura works is challenged, and beyond that, is paltry at best. The students all come from impoverished backgrounds, many of them don't even speak English well. Their textbooks are sorely outdated, and many of the teachers who are placed in the classrooms are ill trained, unlicensed, or simply don't care.

Secondly, there is a general air of apathy at the school. From the descriptions offered by various characters, the facilities haven't been fixed, repaired or updated, violence is not dealt with, and teen pregnancies and drug abuse are rampant. The suicide rate is also quite high.

In many respects, it is easy to see, given this environment, how Laura would finally lose it. The students adopted the air of apathy and though she was dedicated and even went above and beyond for them, their achievements were lackluster at best.

Misconception

There are several subtle layers of misconceptions that happen in this novel. First, Janice believes that with age comes wisdom. This misconception is first dispelled when she works for a short while at the nursing home. Many of the residents act like children



and in fact, many of her own friends have more wisdom than the older folks in the nursing home.

Secondly, Janice also has a 'misconception' in that she miscarries toward the end of the novel. She believes that she can starve the baby out of her, by refusing to eat. She does miscarry, and symbolically she has starved the notion of new life out of herself.

She has also refused to allow the environment to break her. Though at the end of the novel it is unclear as to whether or not she will go on to college.

Laura also suffers from misconception. She believes that she dealt with her mother's death many, many years ago. She also believed, when she was a little girl going over to Frankye's house, that not caring about people was the only way to survive.

With Frankye's death, however, she realizes that cutting oneself off from others only hurts the person isolating themselves, and it denies the world another voice that might add to the good that might be done in the world.

Student/Teacher Bond

Within the framework of the novel, there is constantly a return to the bond that is forged between a student and their teacher. This is an unwritten contract of trust and mutual respect between the two; something that Ms. Freedman had with most of her students in the reading class.

Though they never told her so, until she was gone, they loved her and they learned quite a bit about life from her. This is evident in the way that she took time out to give them all an impromptu sex ed class. And, she also brought in cupcakes for all of them, even when they treated her terribly.

Her writing assignments were always geared toward making her students think outside of themselves and their lives, and into the greater world of which they were a part. This is evident in many of the initial essays, and in the interaction between characters towards the end of the book.

In particular, Janice feels close to Ms. Freedman and Laura feels particularly stricken with guilt and anguish when Janice tells her about the miscarriage and all of the problems that have befallen her since Laura's time at Bridges. Laura believes that if she had been able to stay there and give Janice the support that she needed that many of the things that happened may never have occurred. The fact that Janice and Cody go to Bridges to see her and to try and obtain her release speaks volumes to the fact that they considered her, not only a teacher, but a friend.

Freedom

Throughout the novel there is a desire for freedom from many things. Most of the students want to be free of the poverty and dead-end lives that they see around them. Though they want better lives for themselves the potential that they all represent can't be nurtured because of the lack of resources.

Freedom is most often represented by birds in this novel. They show up on the beach when Janice has learned that she is pregnant and is wondering about having an abortion. A bird shows up to 'liberate' Laura when she is having her mental breakdown, and the symbol of the Phoenix is offered as a representation of Laura's upcoming rebirth. Often, Laura compares the talking of students in the hallway to the squawking and chirping of birds, birds that are all caged and may never fly.

Laura wants freedom from the damage that her parents inflicted on her emotionally. She also wants to be free of her feelings of self recrimination over the death of her mother and the way she treated Frankye. Janice wants freedom from the life that she lives and from being forced into a mold that she doesn't feel fits who she is.

Styles

Point of View

Primarily the novel is told from Laura or Janice's point of view, in first person. There is one section where the story is told from Cody's point of view. Occasionally, Janice views herself in the second person, and when this occurs it is usually because Janice is disassociating from the event. Since Laura is a recovering mental patient, and Janice is a young distraught and angry woman, both of them are fairly unreliable narrators. Cody's perspective, when offered, is peppered with half truths and more of what he wants to happen than what really did happen.

Language and Meaning

This novel is set in a small border town in Texas, which means that many of the customs, words, and influences will be Mexican and Hispanic in nature. Often, Janice will use Spanish words interchangeably with English.

Structure

The novel is told using many different techniques. There is a shifting of tenses, the use of recipes, emails, letters, dreams, and medical announcements which, when pieced together, give a very detailed view of the chain of events revolving around Laura's breakdown and Janice's decline.



Quotes

Then I used my critical reading skills, like we practiced with the toothpaste ads. I realized: you are in the looney bin.

-- Janice (The UnGame)

Importance: This is when Janice figures out where Ms. F has gone. None of the other students seem to notice or care, or have the energy to figure it out. Janice does and this sets the tone for what makes Janice special.

It just says your name," you say. "It just says, 'Shirley.

-- Janice (I Have Borne Witness)

Importance: This is where the reader sees that Janice is a compassionate individual, that she cares about the people at the nursing home. The bracelet actually says 'Do Not Resuscitate' .

What I want for him is to experience some kind of opening outward. A healing. A sense of peace. To experience the humming lake of love beneath our feet.

-- Laura (Turnip)

Importance: This quote shows the anguish that Laura always felt toward her father and his narrow mindedness.

"I believe that every good thing counts.

-- Laura (Turnip)

Importance: In this chapter Laura talks about her realization that even the small, seemingly little things, matter. She's saying this, initially, about her father, but then applies that to her and her work with the kids at school.

The moon is sort of milky gray and the sky is sharp black behind it. "Today is my birthday," I say. "Da moon," the kid says. "Da moon. Da moon. Da moon.

-- Laura (Black Socketed, Blind)

Importance: She's writing about her mother who killed herself. This is a poetic and figurative way of talking about her mother's suicide.

My mother, the bright-plumaged bird who came to my window, who said to me: leave here, before you are destroyed.

-- Laura (Black Socketed, Blind)

Importance: Still talking about her mother, Laura says that her mother's spirit seems to be telling her that if she isn't careful she will also be consumed and destroyed.



Turns out it wasn't the poor quality of El Giraffe submissions that made me throw up every morning, but instead the fact that I am pregnant."

-- Janice (The Wormhole)

Importance: This is where the reader, and Cody, learn that Janice has gotten pregnant after sleeping with Danny.

An uninvited guest, unfurling in your stomach like a weed, a vine, a tree."

-- Janice (The Holy Innocent)

Importance: This is how Janice initially sees her unborn child. However, after she's had a spontaneous miscarriage, she feels differently.

The priest said the earth was tired of people. It was spitting them out like bad fish. Expelling the poison of men."

-- Laura (The Sea Gave Up Her Dead)

Importance: This is a portion of a dream that Laura journaled as part of her therapy. It indicates and represents much of the 'poison' of her past finally coming to the surface.

You're throwing your life away like a rancid pot of stew!"

-- Cody (Mexico Foxtrot Rides Again)

Importance: Cody finds out that Janice is not going to college, is still dating Danny, and that she's lost her job at the nursing home.

Even now, if I wanted to, I could swallow my pride, call Glenda, and say, "Wire me money for a bus ride to Piggot. I'm coming home." Then I realized: I should just fucking do that."

-- Janice (Elephants Never Forget)

Importance: This is when Janice decides to turn her life around. She's in a halfway house and decides to read Laura's journal again. It inspires her to take action and call her father and stepmother.

It helps to surround yourself with words and people who affirm your faith that the heart is more important than the body, that what you do is not who you are.

-- Laura (Uncommon Happiness)

Importance: This is Laura's response to a woman who has written to her through Laura's blog (Uncommon Happiness). The woman is despondent because she is physically disabled and focusing on the things she can't have or do.