

Whirligig Study Guide

Whirligig by Paul Fleischman

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Contents

Whirligig Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	4
Plot Summary.....	6
Chapter 1, Party Time.....	8
Chapter 2, Weeksboro, Maine.....	11
Chapter 3, The Afterlife.....	13
Chapter 4, Miami, Florida.....	16
Chapter 5, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.....	18
Chapter 6, Bellevue, Washington.....	20
Chapter 7, Apprentices.....	22
Chapter 8, San Diego, California.....	24
Chapter 9, "Everybody Swing!".....	26
Characters.....	29
Objects/Places.....	37
Setting.....	41
Social Sensitivity.....	42
Literary Qualities.....	43
Themes.....	44
Themes/Characters.....	47
Style.....	48
Quotes.....	51
Adaptations.....	53
Topics for Discussion.....	55
Essay Topics.....	57



[Ideas for Reports and Papers.....58](#)

[Further Study.....60](#)

[Copyright Information.....62](#)



Overview

Whirligig demonstrates graphically how actions, good and bad, large or small, spin on and on in never ending circles of consequence, like concentric circles moving outward from a pebble dropped in the water.

Sixteen-year-old Brent Bishop, junior at Montfort, a private high school in Chicago, searches for self and acceptance by his peers in the right clothes, the right car, the right school, enough money, alcohol, and the right girl friend. His journey takes him to a party with a friend who neglected to tell him it was a Chess-themed party and everyone was to dress in all white or all black.

"He is always the new kid, stumbling through the maze, never quite rich or goodlooking or athletic enough to join the elite.

Unless he plays his cards right at the party tonight."

Frequent moves, as his father move up the corporate ladder, intensify Brent's feelings of isolation and insecurity and push him into unwise decisions. Both alcohol and pot are available at the party and Brent, "proud of the fact that he could hold hard liquor," drinks. When he is verbally "slapped in the face" by Brianna, the one girl he wants to impress, he loses control, swings a fist at his host, and leaves the party in humiliation and despair. He goes on the wrong expressway with no idea how to get home, and he wallows in self-pity. Reason flees and the humiliation he anticipates from classmates on Monday morning cloud his thinking. Deciding on suicide, he takes his hands from the wheel of his car. Instead of ending his own life, he ends the life of eighteen-year-old Lea Zamora. She was a "senior at Niles North High School, an honor student, member of the student council, the orchestra, the track team, active in the Filipino community, volunteer at Resurrection Hospital. Why did he have to kill someone like that?"

His driver's license is confiscated at the scene of the accident, and at a hearing, the judge sentences him to probation in a detention center. Brent feels relief, then dissatisfaction, with the judge's ruling. He realizes he wanted a punishment. When he is able to meet with Mrs. Zamora "to apologize, and to understand, and to atone," she tells him she does not believe in retribution.

She tells him about Lea and her love for life, how she loved to make people laugh, and her love for whirligigs. Mrs. Zamora requests, "that [he] make four whirligigs, of a girl that looks like Lea. Put her name on them. Then set them up in Washington, California, Florida, and Maine—the corners of the United States. Let people all over the country receive joy from her even though she's gone. You make the smiles that she would have made. It's the only thing you can do for me. That's what I ask."

Mrs. Zamora supplies a Greyhound bus pass, good for forty-five days. Over the objections of his parents, Brent consents to fulfill the request and with plywood pieces,



new tools, an old book about building whirligigs, and some camping equipment in his backpack, he sets out for Washington.

He travels to each of the states stipulated by Mrs. Zamora where he fashions whirligigs, each one more complex than the last one, using the patterns he chooses from the book.

During his journey, Brent's self-esteem grows. He learns how to enjoy simple pleasures. A new interest in reading develops and he finds he enjoys learning new things.

He finds a new connectedness to creation, loses his feelings of isolation, and gains a sense of his own worth. He changes from a self-centered, rather unlikeable young man, into a more mature and likeable young man.

Alternating chapters flash forward, in a reverse chronology, to stories within the story about the profound effects the whirligigs have on the lives of others who encounter the whirligigs. They are a too-studious eighth-grader in Maine and her best friend, an immigrant from Puerto Rico sweeping streets in Miami, Florida, an adopted Korean boy in Washington, and a dying grandmother and her teenage granddaughter in San Diego, California.

When Brent completes the final whirligig and installs it at the home of an artist in Maine, he feels a sense of change, as if he is oddly buoyant. "The guilt hasn't magically vanished overnight. Four whirligigs wouldn't accomplish that." He does feel ready to return to Chicago and his parents, deliver the photos to Lea's mother, and start in a new school in the fall. "He felt that he was up to it."



Plot Summary

Brent Bishop, the new kid in eleventh grade, has just committed social suicide at the party he counted on to make him cool. Drunk, enraged and humiliated, he decides real suicide is the only future he wants. When it's over, Brent just has bruises, but Lea, a loving, eighteen-year-old honor student, the driver who hit him, is killed. Her mother wants Brent to keep the girl's spirit alive by making four whirligigs with her face and her name and planting one in each corner of the country. With a bus pass, a book and a photograph, Brent takes on her task. As he spreads Lea's spirit, she gives him his own, and by the time he is done, he has discovered his own capacity to face the future. The world is a whirligig, its parts invisibly linked, and his whirligigs will affect other lives in ways he will never know.

Brent Bishop, soon to be seventeen, is the new kid at the Montfort School in Chicago. The family has just moved here, its fourth move in seven years, each a rung for his father on his way up the company ladder. Brent is acutely aware of kids his age, registering all the social cues and cool styles and even changing the radio stations on the headset he wears to the popular ones. The headset is always around his neck or on his head because music is the only way he can tame his temper. His fantasies are about being admired, and he knows he would be admired if Brianna were his girlfriend. He goes to a party at Chaz's house, knowing she'll be there. Chaz is the de facto leader of the eleventh grade, and this party could be Brent's ticket to popularity. Brent is nervous, not dressed right for the party's theme, and he drinks too much scotch. When Brianna screams at him to leave her alone, Brent is like a deer in headlights. Chaz tries to make it a joke, but a sense of humor is a luxury Brent could never afford. He runs from the party back to his car, humiliated, enraged, drunk and exhausted from years of working too hard to fit in. He is on the wrong highway, and he just wants to die. He takes his hands from the wheel and closes his eyes.

Brent is not dead, not even badly hurt, but the eighteen-year-old honor student who was driving the car that hit his is dead. Brent tells no one he was trying to commit suicide, overwhelmed by his guilt. He is sentenced to probation, and while he is relieved not to be sentenced to a detention center, he craves a bigger punishment, some acknowledgement of the unspeakable thing he has done. Lea's mother accepts the judge's offer of a meeting to discuss restitution. She has decided to charge Brent with a task that has purpose, the purpose of spreading Lea's loving spirit into the world, now that Lea cannot do it herself. Brent is to make four whirligigs, inspired by the one Lea's grandfather made her when she was a girl. He is to paint her likeness and her name on each and set them at each of the four corners of the country, then photograph them and deliver the photographs to Mrs. Zamora when he returns. His parents object, but Brent agrees to take on the task. He sets out with a Greyhound bus pass, a photo of Lea and a whirligig book.

Brent sees new things in the world and discovers new things in himself as he travels alone and learns to make whirligigs. He finds ways to manage his temper, and he discovers curiosity and a desire to learn. He teaches himself to play the harmonica and



to know the stars in the sky, the shells on the beach and the birds all around him. He struggles to make the whirligigs worthy. The second is more difficult than the first, and the third is still more difficult. By the time he is ready to make the last whirligig, he has lost the book, and the design is entirely his own creation. It is the best likeness of Lea, the truest representation of her spirit and an evocative work of art - the whirligig with the power to hold back her death. This last whirligig, the one that sets Lea's spirit free, is the one that finally gives Brent's spirit back to him. He is changed by the time he has finished Mrs. Zamora's task. He will always feel guilt for Lea's death. It will reside in him like ashes after a fire, unconsumed. He can imagine himself in Chicago, though, starting a new school in the fall. He sees a future, and he is up to it.

Others' stories are told with Brent's, stories of people whom his whirligigs touch in years to come. Those people and their stories are also part of Brent. Brent thinks of his whirligigs, meshed with each other as their mechanisms are interlocked, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. He sees that the world itself is a whirligig, its myriad parts invisibly linked. The hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carry motion across the globe and over the centuries.



Chapter 1, Party Time

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Brent Bishop, the new kid in eleventh grade, has just committed social suicide at the party he counted on to make him cool. Drunk, enraged and humiliated, he decides real suicide is the only future he wants. When it's over Brent just has bruises, but the driver who hit him is killed, Lea, a loving, eighteen-year-old honor student. Her mother wants Brent to keep the girl's spirit alive by making four whirligigs with her face and her name and planting one in each corner of the country. With a bus pass, a book and a photograph, Brent takes on her task. As he spreads Lea's spirit she gives him his own, and by the time he is done, he has discovered his own capacity to face the future. The world is a whirligig, its parts invisibly linked, and his whirligigs will affect other lives in ways he will never know.

Brent is playing a video game, killing time until the party he looks forward to later tonight. His mother calls him down to dinner. Since the family moved to this house in Chicago a few months ago, they dine at the island in the kitchen. His mom sets the table with the remote at his father's right, so he can channel surf during commercials. Brent judges his father's mood by his grunts back at the TV. His father's corporate climb has demanded four moves in the last seven years. This last promotion "rescued them from Atlanta's heat, put Brent into a private school, bankrolled his mother's furniture-buying spree, but hadn't seemed to improve his own spirits." Brent's father has started complaining about work again, and Brent has started to feel sorry for him.

Brent gets ready for the party, combing his blond hair straight back like the models in *GQ*. He wears an earring in his left ear. At his schools in Connecticut, then Atlanta, it was the right ear, but at the Montfort School, where he is a junior, it is the left ear. That is one of the first things he checks out at a new place. Learning the cool radio stations is another, so his headset always plays the cool thing to hear. He selects his clothes for the party "to impress without risking being made fun of." This is critical tonight because the party is at Chaz's house, and Brent isn't actually invited. He wears khakis and a Chicago Bulls t-shirt. He attaches his wallet chain to a back loop, slips his wallet into his back pocket and puts his Vuarnet sunglasses into his shirt pocket. He drives over to pick up his friend Jonathan, who bounds out his door in a Cubs hat backwards and shredded jeans, causing Brent to regret his ironed khakis. Jonathan makes a joke and winces when Brent answers it seriously.

A sense of humor is a luxury that Brent has never been able to afford. He is always the new kid, always stumbling through the maze and never rich or good-looking or athletic enough to join the elite. Compared to the kids at Montfort, Brent is poor. He must get it right at this party tonight. Jonathan reassures Brent that his coming uninvited is okay. Being Jonathan's friend makes him Chaz's friend. Jonathan directs him to Chaz's house, on the other side of Chicago. They park with the mass of cars in front and go through to the patio and yard, but everyone is dressed in black and white except them!



Jonathan forgot they were supposed to be dressed like chess pieces! Brent is panicked and then furious with Jonathan. Brent was a headbanger as a child, and he still throws tantrums. He pulls on his headphones and tries to relax. He considers just leaving now, but he spots Brianna, the object of his affections, a beautiful girl with long, wavy blond hair. Having her for a girlfriend would mean instant respect.

Chaz greets them, teasing them about their clothes. He notes that Brent's last name is Bishop, like the chess piece, and then puts his hands on Brent's shoulders and attempts to push him first to the left, then the right, like a bishop moves in chess. Brent wants to punch Chaz. He hates Chaz's hands on his shoulders, but Chaz is the de facto ruler of their class, the coolest kid in eleventh grade. If Brent loses his cool here, he knows he is ruined. He makes himself a scotch and soda, heavy on the scotch, and joins Jonathan with some other guys. He fixes a second drink and returns to the group. He spots Brianna again, heading to the bar. He joins her there, adding more Scotch to his drink and trying to chat with her. Her answers are short, but he follows her, still trying to have a conversation with her as she walks away. Finally she stops short, turns and screams at him, "Stop hanging all over me!" She tells him he's like a leech or something - at school, too. Everyone is silent. Brent is paralyzed. Chaz makes a joke of it, but Brent is desperate to get out of everyone's sight. Now Chaz's hands are back on his shoulders, leading him to a bench. The hated grip on his shoulders, the scotch and the humiliation all explode inside Brent, who wheels and throws a punch at Chaz. It glances off his ear, but the crown he's been wearing falls. Brent kicks it off into the grass, runs back to his car and drives away.

Brent replays that all in his head, and he knows that he's just destroyed himself. He rants aloud and then realizes he's gotten onto the wrong highway. He's not sure how to get home, and there's no map. He grows calm, becoming unconcerned at not knowing where he is. He doesn't really care where he's going. What difference does it make? His life is over here. A measured voice begins inside his head, telling him there's no need to go home and no need to feel more pain. He has felt enough. It tells him that he has the power to stop the hurting. The voice is like morphine, hypnotic. He takes his hands from the wheel as it tells him that he has the absolute power to end his life, right now. He closes his eyes.

Chapter 1, Party Time Analysis

Brent is exhausted. He is supremely alert to any cue that might help him fit in, and his hyper-vigilance is exhausting. Everyone else is going to a party tonight, but he is going to the self-imposed most important exam of his life, in a life that is probably a sequence of "most important" exams. He is the inadequate anthropologist in his own life, always trying to understand and imitate the natives' behavior, figure out which handful of beads wins their friendship and discern which reflection in their eyes is him.

Brent's temper is exhausting. It drains him when it rises up out of nowhere, and it is on or off, with no degrees in between. It drains him not to act out, not to show his temper, so no one gets hurt, including him. Time is exhausting and a drag, and Brent needs to

kill time. He wishes he could fast-forward through time like he can with a video. Brent is drunk, enraged and humiliated when he leaves the party, but above all he is exhausted. He wants it to end, and he wants to be dead.



Chapter 2, Weeksboro, Maine

Chapter 2, Weeksboro, Maine Summary

On a very cold, clear, windy day, Alexandra is trying to convince Steph to come with her. Alexandra is leading Steph out to the Point, to throw a friend a lifeline, she says, and Steph is the friend. They are, as eighth graders, in their biological prime. Alexandra has had a boyfriend now for almost four weeks, while Steph remains single. It is the Christmas holidays, a painful time for single people. They are best friends, and have been since nursery school, so they must find Steph a boyfriend. How does Alexandra know that Steph even wants a boyfriend? Alexandra believes that Steph cannot be completely satisfied by the eels and urchins in her aquariums, despite her love of marine biology. She thinks Steph acts as if she's trying to repel boys by not growing her hair long, not wearing a little makeup, taking German as her foreign language (the most masculine language on the face of the earth) and calling herself *Steph* (which sounds like *strep*) instead of Stephanie. She is just being brutally honest, she says.

"Thanks. I noticed," Steph says. "Of course, since I'm not slinky or shapely, and in fact am puny in every department, with freckles and oily, drab, brown hair, *Steph* seems like the perfect name for me." Alexandra shrinks into her parka, trying to be less tall, less blond and less beautiful. She kicks a rock, apologizes and tells Steph to delete the whole conversation. She tells Steph that she is funny, loyal and brilliant and that any bonehead boy who doesn't see this is a total idiot. The method they will be using, however, should attract a boy who is worthy of her.

Steph and Alexandra turn off the road towards an abandoned house. They go past the "Keep Out" sign, past the empty house and out to where they can see a strange contraption at the edge of a cliff. It is as big as a box kite and mounted on a pole, with moving arms, vanes, wheels and propellers. It is many different colors and looks like nothing in particular, except at the top where Steph can make out a woman's head with reflectors in her hair and shells and chimes hanging around her neck. In the wind, even with half the parts stuck, it flutters and shimmers and rings. They do not know who made it or how long it has been there, but it says *Lea Rosalia Santos Zamora* on the wood. Alexandra has brought Steph here for guided imagery, to visualize her desires and broadcast them for the wind to carry like seeds into the future. Steph objects. Alexandra believes the flashing whirligig symbolizes all the unseen forces and is, itself, an invisible force like electricity that was always there even before anyone knew about it. Steph is cold and uncomfortable. Alexandra insists. Alexandra did a visualization here of acing an algebra test, and it worked.

The two girls sit while Alexandra concocts a lengthy fantasy about Steph, tall with long hair and a D-cup bra ("No! That's too big!" Steph objects), in which "the glow of [her] mental and physical powers is like a beacon, alas, to the entire male sex." To escape the ruses the unworthy males employ to charm her this particular day, Steph returns to her boat and examines an eel she netted earlier. She thinks it is a new species, and she



wonders for whom she will name it. She casts off, heads out and sees something not right off in the distance. Is it a buoy or debris? No, it's a body! She rescues a boy, a beautiful, sixteen-year-old French-Canadian whose boat has capsized. He is an orphan who studies barnacle reproduction. He is freezing. Steph remembers her first aid class, throws off her clothes and embraces him tightly under a blanket to give him her heat. As color returns to his cheeks, he looks into her eyes and knows there will now be more in his life than barnacles, and she knows for whom she will name the eel. Steph keeps interrupting this fantasy with wry comments, but the story gets good, and she lets Alexandra finish it in peace. At its conclusion, Alexandra instructs Steph to keep her sarcastic mouth shut and her eyes closed and to hold the image in her head, which she does until they both hear the unmistakable sound of a third person's throat being cleared. Disbelieving, fearful and hopeful, Steph turns her head and stares.

That was three years ago. Steph is five-foot-four, still flat-chested, logical and scientific. She cannot explain how the nine-year-old boy who watched them that day ended up there, or how he led her to his older brother, Kyle, who has been her heart's joy ever since. She pays her respects to the unseen forces, just in case, by keeping the whirligig painted and repaired, and when she discovers a new species, she will name it for the best friend who led her there.

Chapter 2, Weeksboro, Maine Analysis

The second chapter is a radical transition. Brent was just attempting suicide on a Chicago highway in spring, and here, in coastal Maine, it is winter. Two girls experiment with guided imagery at the foot of some outrageous contraption. Given the title of the book, the reader assumes it is a whirligig, but we can make no connection to the first chapter. That is fitting. The central image of this book is the world as a whirligig, with moving parts that are interconnected and hidden, in which every motion has repercussions that extend through time and space. This chapter illustrates the notion, even before it is formulated. The whirligig is not new in the time of this chapter, although Maine winters are hard and the Maine coast is windy. It could have been put there just last summer, plus another three years, as Steph reveals in her epilogue at the end of the chapter. Whenever and however it happens, the whirligig is there, and at least one girl, Alexandra, thinks it magical. Steph will take care of it for a time, not convinced of its magic, but in honor of the magic it brought into her life. Two lives have been touched by this whirligig that does not yet exist in the time of Brent.



Chapter 3, The Afterlife

Chapter 3, The Afterlife Summary

Brent is awakened by sunlight through the window and the sound of the bus changing gears. The sunrise he can see through the mountains is like a gift, the gift of a day after a night or the gift of a life after a death. Brent has been on the bus for two days, close now to Seattle and climbing through the Cascades. He wonders about the lives of his fellow passengers. He is living his second life now, the life that came from Lea's death and began with the crash.

Brent does not remember the impact. He has only cuts, bruises and a minor concussion. He remembers the ambulance lights, the alcohol test and the police station. They tell him later that he has hit another car, and the woman who drove it is dead. He is made mute by the news. He knows that he tried to kill himself. That he killed someone else leaves him numb. He does not speak for two days. He digs out the newspapers his parents have hidden in the trash to learn about her. She was Lea Zamora, eighteen, a high-school senior, an honor student, in orchestra, on the track team, active in the Filipino community and a hospital volunteer. Why did he have to kill someone like that? It is too late to go to her funeral. He turns seventeen, speaks little, eats little and does not listen to music. The concussion's headaches come less often, and he finishes school from home. He is charged with DUI and manslaughter and interviewed by social workers and psychologists before he is sentenced. His parents hire lawyers. He sends an apology to Mr. and Mrs. Zamora that is returned to him inside another envelope, mutilated and burned. He is sentenced to probation, alcohol counseling, therapy for depression and service in an emergency room. He deserves more punishment, and he realizes that he wants more punishment.

Mrs. Zamora consents to a meeting to discuss restitution. Brent wishes his parents were not with him here. Miss Gill, the mediator, speaks for a while and says that we never know all the consequences of our acts. They reach into places we cannot see and into the future, where no one can see. Mrs. Zamora describes how her daughter's death affects the family. Brent has practiced a lengthy apology, but he can only say "I'm sorry," over and over, through tears at first and then as he wails. Mrs. Zamora talks about restitution. Unlike her husband, who has not come with her, Mrs. Zamora does not believe in retribution; she has seen rebel skirmishes in the Philippines and knows what it is like to take an eye for an eye. Lea had a very caring soul, strong and generous. Everybody who saw her smiled. She would have gone to college in Boston and done volunteer work in California this summer. She would have spread joy all over the country. Brent can do nothing to bring her back, but he can do something for her spirit. Lea's grandfather was a carpenter who made her a whirligig with its face painted to look like Lea. People notice it, stop and smile, as they smiled at Lea. Mrs. Zamora has bought Brent a picture of Lea and a pass on Greyhound, good for forty-five days. She wants him to plant whirligigs with Lea's image and name in Washington, California, Florida and Maine, each of the country's four corners. He is to photograph them and



deliver the photographs to her when he returns. Miss Gill explains again that restitutions cannot be imposed; they can only be agreed to. Brent's parents object and give many good reasons. Brent says yes.

Brent has a picture of Lea and a book about making whirligigs. He looks at both on the bus. He struggles into his backpack in Seattle, heavy with the tools he bought for his task. He makes his way to a waterfront campground that is already full. He has forgotten it is the July Fourth weekend. A park ranger suggests that someone might share a campsite. A man from Canada, taking his tent from his bicycle, agrees to Brent's halting request and welcomes his company. He says he's studying the strange local customs of the natives. Brent understands and feels that he shares the same distanced perspective. He spends the evening with the Canadian, who teaches him to play *Go*, and then Brent starts his work in the morning. He gets frustrated easily the first day. Then he becomes angry, and he is afraid of his anger. A previous owner wrote small, careful notes in the margins of the instruction book that Brent uses. Brent studies them, calmed by the stranger's patient script. He cuts his hand repeatedly and thinks that he does it because his punishment is too light and he deserves more. It takes him two days to make the whirligig. Then, he is finished. The whirligig is a girl, Lea, playing a full-size harp. It was meant to be an angel, but he broke her wings the first day and decided they were unnecessary. When he blows on the whirligig, the arms pinwheel and seem to play the harp strings. He is still in the park, near the water. He sees a tree limb that is open to the wind. He nails the whirligig to a driftwood mount, then climbs up and nails the mount to the tree limb. When a breeze finally comes, the figure feels it before he does. It works beautifully. The arms lift and then spin. The phrase "the breath of life" comes to his mind.

Chapter 3, The Afterlife Analysis

Brent cannot account, now, for how he felt then. He cannot imagine, much less remember, how he could have overlooked the danger he caused to other drivers. He tells no one that he was trying to kill himself. Perhaps he fears that it will make people more sympathetic and shift some of the blame for this unspeakable thing he has done. He will never forget his guilt. He spends all day composing the note of four sentences that he sends to the Zamoras, and in his nightmares Mr. Zamora chases him through the Philippine jungle. His parents beam when the verdict is read, since they are so relieved on his behalf, but he cannot imagine anyone smiling in a world where he has killed a girl and he gets to go on, just like that. He needs another world right now, and Mrs. Zamora gives it to him.

All the detail that describes Mrs. Zamora - the red hair so alive, her size, the necklaces she wears, one a Native American sign and some others astrological - conspire to forewarn the reader that she will suggest something alternative, outside the mainstream, and she does. She believes that things happen for a reason and that for some unimaginable reason the needs of the universe required the sacrifice of her daughter. She does not want retribution. She does not dispense punishment or justice. What are these things to her? Her daughter is dead. She has thought and thought, and



she realizes that she must give Brent a purpose that they can share, Lea, Brent and she. She has conceived of a purposeful task. Brent's purpose is to spread Lea's spirit out in the world, the very spirit that Brent snatched away, because now Lea can never spread it herself. She tells Brent about the whirligigs, the means by which her purpose may be achieved. She gives Brent a path away from his world, an activity on which to focus his attention and a way for him to find some meaning in his profoundly meaningless act.



Chapter 4, Miami, Florida

Chapter 4, Miami, Florida Summary

The night is quiet and dark. There is no traffic, only a man. It is very peaceful. He says that peace is a hard thing to find. He is driving his street sweeper. He never saw a street sweeper until he was eleven, when his family came to Miami. He thinks about things while he drives. He thinks about the shearwater bird.

The man comes from Puerto Rico, where his family lives in the mountains until his father has to sell their farm to the power company. They move to San Juan, on the coast. People argue there all the time - for the government, against the government or about whether Puerto Rico should join the United States. One day a bomb goes off near their house. One month later, they fly to Miami. None of them speaks English, so he just looks out the window in school. The next year, in junior high school, the teacher gets very angry, thinking that the boy is ignoring him on purpose. The next week, he is sent to a school for retarded children, where they put all the kids who didn't know English. He does not want to go and fights about it with his father. He gets a job in a restaurant when he is fourteen. He takes his wages home to his father, knowing he needs the money for rent. His father takes the money, and the boy never again has to pretend he goes to school.

Everyone speaks Spanish at the restaurant. The waitresses bring him food, calling him "Flaco" because he is so skinny. People argue at the restaurant. The cooks fight over the tape player. The cook from Puerto Rico listens to Puerto Rican salsa, especially Willie Colun. Flaco works there for four years, and then he gets a job at another restaurant. He learns how to speak English from the people there. The most beautiful waitress at that restaurant is Constancia. She is eighteen and also Puerto Rican. They get married and live with her mother. That is a very happy time. He goes to class at night to learn English better, and then he gets a job with the city fixing holes in the street. It pays much more money than the restaurant. Constancia gets pregnant. They have a beautiful baby girl. Constancia smiles and laughs all the time with the baby. The baby gets a cold when she is twelve months old that gets worse. Then she dies. Constancia changes. She doesn't go back to work. She watches TV all day, and her face looks like one of the statues in church. One year later they have a boy, but instead of smiling and laughing at the baby, Constancia is worried all the time. Constancia mops and vacuums every day, and she uses a special spray to kill germs on his toys and the TV and all the furniture. When Raul is four, Constancia's grandparents come from Puerto Rico to live in their house. Her grandfather plays dominoes in the kitchen all day with the man next door while they watch TV and argue about politics. He is going deaf, so the TV is always very loud.

Constancia's mother tries to keep everyone peaceful, but it is always like a war in their house. Even the Pope could not make peace there. One night on TV, Flaco sees a bird in flight. The announcer says it is a shearwater bird and lives almost all of its life on the



ocean. Flaco wishes he could be that bird. His seventeen-year-old cousin from New Jersey moves in with them. The cousin always plays rock and roll very loud. Flaco saves enough money for a car, and the first time the cousin drives it, he has an accident. Then Flaco loses his job. He can't find another one. Constanica starts bringing in money by taking care of babies for other women, first two babies and then five. There's always a baby yelling and the loud TV and rock and roll. Everybody argues.

One morning, Flaco goes out for a drive through the Everglades and all the way across to the Gulf. He finds a restaurant with a little wooden marching band nailed to the door. It is still cool and early. At the end of a pier is a fishing boat. He has been thinking about the shearwater bird for months, and he asks the captain if he has ever seen one. The captain says he sees them all the time. He lets Flaco on the boat for half price because he doesn't want to fish. The sky is clear, and the water is calm. It feels good being so far away from the land, on the water. The captain calls to Flaco and points out the flock of birds that is following the boat, diving into the water and fighting over fish, very noisily. These are the shearwater birds. This is not what Flaco imagined, and he is sad all the way back to land. He looks again at the wooden marching band at the restaurant and its different instruments - a trumpet, trombone, clarinet and drum. Birds don't live alone, he tells himself. They live in flocks, like people. People live in groups, like that little wooden band. Where there is a group, there is fighting. If the group gets along, maybe they make good music instead of arguing, like Willie Colun's band. That is how life is. He drives back home. That was last year. This summer he got this job driving a street sweeper from two until ten in the morning. It is very peaceful during the night. In an hour traffic will start, and everyone will be in a hurry. He is ready for it. He always brings a tape player, and he will put on Willie Colun's band.

Chapter 4, Miami, Florida Analysis

All Flaco wants is peace and quiet and, if he is lucky, to see his wife laughing again. Every change in his life makes more noise. The little wooden band he describes does not seem from the description to be a whirligig, but this is clearly another part of Lea's spirit that Brent has added to the world. Flaco finds very big things in this little wooden band. He finds a bigger understanding of life than he had before, a bigger acceptance and a new perspective. The figures have touched his life and the lives of the people he touches.



Chapter 5, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

Chapter 5, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star Summary

Brent is on his way to San Diego after a restless night at a noisy flophouse in San Francisco. He thought to build the second whirligig there, but it was too cold. He has nothing warm to wear. He is learning stars from the star guide he bought, and he looks from the book to the sky and back, saying their names aloud. He is at home on the bus now, familiar with the inevitable drunk at the back and the woman in front who needs reassurance from the bus driver every ten miles. At the bus station in San Diego, two men try to steal his backpack. He is on his own, with no one around to help him. He shouts at them, and they leave it alone. While he calms down, it dawns on him why animals live in herds. He is headed towards a youth hostel, suggested to him by a Dutch woman he met. He does not want to use the Visa his parents gave him, although when he calls they beg him to stay at a Sheraton. This is his trip to take, not theirs. Brent is asked for his passport at the hostel; it is lodging intended for foreign visitors. The sympathetic desk clerk invites Brent to convince him that he is actually Canadian by answering a few questions correctly - which the clerk then answers himself when Brent clearly cannot.

Brent considers a bearded man playing a concertina in the dining room for the other residents. He envies his ability to entertain himself and others. He considers the Canadian cyclist at the campground, with his *Go* and instruction book. His own life seems unfurnished with skills and interests by comparison. He awakens to the smell of bacon in the morning, and he joins the guests at the free breakfast. He finds it difficult to make the appropriate casual conversation about his story, where he is from and why he is traveling. He lies, thinking how he deceives them. They think he is a tourist, not knowing that he is a murderer on a mission of repentance. He wonders if prison might be easier, after all. He sits beside a German who is one year older than he is, traveling before he starts college in the fall. They spend the morning at the San Diego Zoo, where Emil, the son of teachers and a student of biology, gives Brent a running commentary on the animals they see. Brent follows him to museums in the afternoon, amazed that someone his own age would go to a museum voluntarily. He takes the lead only to stop into a music store, where he buys a harmonica and an instruction book. At dinner that night, Brent sees men cooking, a new sight to him, and he hears the guests discussing world affairs, sometimes with raised voices, something that is also new to him. These people know so much about things, and they care about them. He is a stranger to a stove, and his family never discusses the affairs of the world. People write postcards after dinner. There is no one to whom he wants to send a postcard, although he has bought some. He feels that he is a planet on which there is no other life as yet. He remembers his harmonica and goes out to the back yard with his instruction book.

Emil is gone when Brent wakes up. Brent finds a park not too far from the hostel, claims a picnic table and begins work on the next whirligig. He chooses a much more complicated pattern from his book, but one where the margin-note writer has been



before him. It will be a spouting whale, operated by a propeller and rods. He is sketching it onto the wood when he realizes there is no place there for Lea. He finds a design in the book for a mermaid and decides to put the mermaid at the top of the whale's spout. The whirligig takes three days, during which he wonders why he chose such a difficult design, making mistake after mistake. The harmonica saves him. He plays it to calm himself when he gets frustrated and angry, and he plays it at night. The work absorbs him. The allies, enemies and potential girlfriends of his first life are fading away. He does not care about his clothes, since he has no one to impress. His only company is Lea, who he feels watching him whenever the wind blows. When the whirligig is finished, he asks the clerk if he can mount it on the front porch of the hostel because he does not think it would last very long in a city park. He mounts it carefully. When the wind springs up, it sends the whale's white spout up and down, with the mermaid on top like a bronc rider. That night, he teaches himself to play "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." As a little kid he thought it was a cheerful song, but he realizes that it is a lament. When he finally gets it right, he closes the book, turns towards the whirligig and serenades Lea, playing the whole song perfectly.

Chapter 5, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star Analysis

Brent has never spent time alone with himself and without electronics. This is all new to him. As before, he observes keenly, and he learns from the people around him. His new observations, though, are not simply about how to act cool or what to wear. Now he must think about what he admires to find the lessons that he can use. He admires the Canadian and the bearded man, for example, for knowing how to do something that is sociable. The Canadian man has an instruction book from which he learns *Go*, and Emil carries a book to read and knows so much about animals. Brent admires their knowledge. Brent decides on a course of action and buys a harmonica and an instruction book. He is not merely imitating others by taking up their interests. He finds something that serves a similar function but that expresses his own interests. Learning to play the harmonica and learning stars both become his recreational activities. Brent no longer thinks about killing time or wishing that it would pass like time in a video game. He is learning to fill his time, instead.



Chapter 6, Bellevue, Washington

Chapter 6, Bellevue, Washington Summary

On the first day of fifth grade, everyone wants to impress Miss Rappalini except Tony. She says something about starting their journals. He is drawing the Seattle Mariners' logo on his desk, waiting for their game with the Yankees to start. His radio is in his t-shirt pocket, hidden by his long-sleeved shirt. He will work the earplug cord down his sleeve, tape it to his palm, put his elbow on the desk, lean his head into his hand and stick the earplug in his ear. The class is supposed to write about what they did over summer vacation. His vacation was like being sick to your stomach. You feel worse and worse. Then you think you might throw up, and then you do throw up. He writes that he had a wonderful summer because he is not going to write the truth. He imagines he is a guest on Bob Baker's Mariners pre-game show. The announcer hopes Tony's mother isn't listening. Tony hopes so, too, since his mother thinks sports fans are lunkheads and time-wasters and says that Bob Baker's voice makes her fillings ache.

Tony is Korean, adopted as a baby by his American parents. His birthday was in June, and he asked for a baseball mitt, a remote-controlled car, a Nintendo and a gift certificate to Sam's Sports Cards. He got two shirts, a microscope, a new music stand and a Sarah Chang CD. Sarah Chang is a Korean violin virtuoso, and Tony plays violin, too. Tony's parents sent him to Suzuki lessons when he was four, summer violin camps, group recitals, more lessons and community youth orchestras. They make him get up early to practice before school. He is not very good, but his mother thinks that because her son is Korean, he can do anything if he applies himself. His father is a scientist, so Tony had to go to science camp in July. His grandfather built the first radio transmitter in Kansas. Tony is named after him, to inspire him. Tony would rather be his sister, Kelsey. She is not named after anybody, and because she is from Peru, nobody expects her to do anything except maybe learn to spin llama wool.

Tony continues thinking about what to write for his essay. The family did go camping this summer for the first time. It was short, a practice trip. They went just a little north, to a campground on the water. The worst part was the whirligig in a tree at their campsite. It was breezy, so the girl's arms were always running, playing the harp, and his mother pointed out how she practices all the time because a musician has to be dedicated. She took lots of pictures of it, some with him under it. Tony hated whoever put it there. He threw a rock at it. He's a pretty good pitcher. He hit it, but it just spun around. His mother heard it hit and caught him before he could throw another rock. She made him stay in his tent the next day. Tony tells the announcer that he really broke the pledge that day - the Asian pledge, the one that pledges to Sarah Chang and all other Asian-Americans that he'll be quiet, hard-working and polite, succeeding in all things through dedication.

Tony's mother had one of the whirligig pictures blown up and framed, and she put it on his wall where she took down the poster of Ken Griffey, Jr.. Every day she tells Tony, "Remember the harp player, Anthony, always practicing." His mother started working



part time in August, when Tony was supposed to be rehearsing for a big recital. Tony was supposed to tape his practices for her, but she didn't always listen to the tapes. It wasn't hard for Tony to fake it, and he just sort of quit. The recital was last week. Mr. Mintz, his teacher, accompanied him on piano, and he knew right away that Tony was unprepared. Afterward, Tony told him everything, even about the whirligig. Mr. Mintz called Tony's mother into the room. He told her a Chinese saying, about how rest gives strength to activity. He said the whirligig works the same way. If it turned all the time without stopping, it would break. He told Tony's mother that he believes Tony is ready for a rest. After that, she let him quit. It was wonderful. That's the thing about throwing up. It's yucky, and then you feel a lot better. He writes in his journal that summer turned out to be pretty good and then goes back to spell it "pritty" good because they don't get graded for spelling in their journals. It makes him laugh.

Chapter 6, Bellevue, Washington Analysis

No one can predict how a whirligig will touch a life. Brent's first whirligig makes Tony miserable when he first sees it. His mother interprets the whirligig as always working and practicing. Tony's teacher is able to find a different lesson than the one his mother found, and Tony finds real joy from the teacher's lesson. Brent and Lea have touched a few more lives.



Chapter 7, Apprentices

Chapter 7, Apprentices Summary

The woman next to Brent boarded in Phoenix and hasn't stopped talking yet. The bus is passing through the desert. The desert appears stage-lit by the moon, the cactus looking like groups of wise men. Brent falls asleep with his head against the window. He gets off to look around in El Paso, where a missing-child flier reminds him of Lea, permanently missing. Outside the light is blinding, and the heat is oppressive. He likes being in Texas, where nobody knows him. A sidewalk preacher turns as Brent passes and shouts out to him, "...A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." His eyes meet Brent's, who is suddenly glad his bus leaves soon. Brent reads *Two Years Before the Mast*, the book Emil left behind for him, all the way across Louisiana. The author set out on a second life, just as he has, but Brent will never complain about the bus again after reading about the miserable life Henry Dana endured as a working sailor. Brent gets off the bus in Tampa at 2 a.m., tired and thirsty. The next local bus south takes him to Beale Beach, on Florida's Gulf Coast. He falls asleep on the beach and wakes up around noon, surprised and disappointed by how tame the waves are. He remembers big, roaring waves in Miami, on the Atlantic side. He considers leaving, but he remembers a French woman in the hostel saying that sometimes the initial disappointments turn into the best experiences.

Brent hikes down the beach from his motel, past the small town, and comes to a boarded-up ice cream shop. Summer is the off season here. There are three picnic tables on the beach side of the shop, once shaded by a metal framework missing most of its panels. He layers palm fronds over the metal frame, while the beach remains deserted. He is making a whirligig with a drummer, a trumpet player, a clarinetist and a trombone player. It has a much more complicated system of rods and pivots that make the instruments dip and rise as if the musicians are marching. For the first time, he reads all the instructions and all the notes in the margins before he starts. Lea will be the clarinetist. He studies a star guide during breaks, suddenly grasping how seasons and day-lengths derive from the earth's angled axis. Why hadn't he learned these things in school? He resolves to give himself a new education. He goes to the Sand Dollar Cafe for dinner, where he ate earlier and where the waitress calls him "baby" and "honey." He feels like a regular.

The next afternoon a pack of seven or eight kids, all black and grammar-school-age except one, burst out from the palms to play in the water. One sees him, and they all come to investigate. They play with his tools and try his harmonica, until he gives each one five nails and puts them in line. Each takes a turn hammering the nails into wood. During the day he works, and at night he plays his harmonica and works with the star guide. The children don't return the next day, but four do the day after. One boy teaches him about shells, and he lets him drill holes in a strip of plywood. He completes the whirligig that afternoon. The wind to test it comes from the children's lungs, for there is no breeze. He has staggered the rise and fall of the instruments to give them a more



exciting rhythm. He fastens it to the metal framework. He tells the children it is for them. They think it will get torn apart in the next hurricane. The boy who drilled holes in the wood strip nails it to the table and blows on the wood. Brent watches him. He will not worry. After the storm, new whirligigs will appear.

Chapter 7, Apprentices Analysis

Brent takes Lea wherever he goes, and he sees her all around him. His response to the world continues to be curious and thoughtful. He is working his way back into the world of human contact slowly and tentatively. The familiarity of the restaurant is pleasant, and the waitress provides the illusion of warmth with none of the obligation, using terms of endearment with everyone. It is easy for him to interact with the children. They do not care so much about him, and they are much more interested in what he is doing and in playing with his toys.

Brent lets go of the third whirligig in a way that is different from the others. He releases it freely into the world. Brent is very influenced by the specific place where he builds each whirligig. Here it hangs in a desolate spot, from an impermanent pole that just shades the tables, when it is not broken. The children have warned him, and he knows that this whirligig will be carried on the wind like neither of its predecessors. There is a special satisfaction here, nevertheless, found in the boy's interest in the properties of a spin. Brent may have inspired something. He cannot know if, or how, or when, but the possibility pleases him. Brent's sense of being part of something larger and connected somehow to the world keeps growing. It is another facet of the world opening up to him, the whirligig world, with its myriad parts and interconnections.



Chapter 8, San Diego, California

Chapter 8, San Diego, California Summary

Whenever Jenny is alone in the house with Grandma, as she is now, she is alert to her presence each moment until someone else comes home. Grandma is old and fragile, and Jenny is afraid that something might happen, that Grandma might need help she cannot give or that she might die. Before Grandma moved in with them last year, she had her own place, a busy life and many friends. Her life has shrunk down to the size of the bed, and she sleeps most of the day. Jenny is reading Anne Frank's letters when she hears Grandma through the intercom, calling her long-dead sister, but she has only said the name absent-mindedly and calls again for her daughter, Jenny's mother. Jenny goes to her. Grandma asks for Jenny's mother and then for Jenny's father, who is still at work. She asks if Jenny can drive and then says, "Let's go, then." Jenny is panicked. She just has a learner's permit. Grandma insists, though, and she won't wait for anyone else to come home. She says that waiting is dangerous at her age. Grandma knows San Diego well, and Jenny knows her usual errands - the pharmacy, the deli she likes and her old house. Still, Grandma won't say where she wants to go.

Jenny and Grandma are driving towards Old Town when Grandma yells "Stop!" It's the middle of the block, but Jenny slams on the brakes, as do ten cars behind her. Jenny appeals for some warning before the next stop. A minute later, Grandma says to go on. Then she says, "Here it is!" and asks Jenny to back up a little. Grandma is talking to herself, and then she tells Jenny to go on and gives her directions. The house that they are in front of belonged to Grandma's dead sister Rachel, whose name is Jenny's middle name. It is very like her parents to put the nice, Old Testament name in the middle and give her a first name that's as far from the old country as they could get. Maybe that is the point, to put Hitler and Poland and the camps behind them and to blend in for a change. Jenny thinks they go too far, not going to synagogue and not talking about Grandma's experience. They even have a Christmas tree! It has sent her in the other direction. She enrolled at Hebrew School, though she is older than all the other kids there, and she had a Bat Mitzvah just last May. She reads everything she can find about the Holocaust, and she gave all her birthday money last year to Simon Wiesenthal's Nazi hunters. Her mother thinks she should smile more to attract boys.

As Jenny and Grandma drive, Grandma mutters in English about places she remembers and then mutters in Yiddish. Jenny's worried that they'll run out of gas. Just then, her grandmother thanks her and says she is done. Jenny doesn't understand. Where have they been? Grandma explains. The first place she said stop, in the middle of the block, was to look at a birch tree she knew. There were many birch trees in Poland. They were beautiful, and she wanted to see one again, one last time. Jenny's eyes well up, and her hands tighten on the wheel. She was the driver, but she hadn't understood the journey. She can barely see for the tears running down her face. Of course, her grandmother knows, and this is her last trip around the old neighborhood. The tears subside, and when Jenny can see, she starts going again. Then, in an



unexpected place on the way home, Grandma tells Jenny to turn. Jenny pulls over in front of a house with rocking chairs on the porch. Grandma points to a corner of the low porch wall and says that they are stopping here for her and for Jenny.

She is pointing to a whirligig, working in the breeze. It is a whale, with a spout that clacks as it moves up and down and a black-haired mermaid riding on the spout. She tells Jenny that somebody, she doesn't know who, said that there shouldn't be laughing after Auschwitz and that nobody could ever want to laugh again after what happened there. Grandma was there, and it was terrible. She knows, though, that all those who died want everyone else to have lives with laughter, to laugh all the laughs that were taken from them. Not all people are bad and want to kill, like Hitler. Some are good, like the maker of this toy that makes people laugh as they pass. This whirligig is what she wants in her head if bad thoughts come when she is dying. That is what she wants to tell her Jenny who has her permit for learning. Grandma is old, and she has her permit for teaching.

Chapter 8, San Diego, California Analysis

Jenny is a very serious girl who has very serious thoughts. She thinks them on her own behalf and on behalf of her parents, who Jenny thinks refuse to think them at all. Grandma did not particularly intend Jenny to be her driver on this trip, but she has decided that her moment is now and that there are things she must see one last time. Jenny can drive, so Jenny can take her. When Grandma tells Jenny why she wanted to see the birch tree, Jenny tells her that she is getting better and she shouldn't talk like that. They both know that is a lie. It is very hard to talk about death and even harder to talk about with someone who will die soon, especially if you are a young girl who has never known death. The serious books do not help, but the whirligig helps. Grandma and Jenny reach out to each other, across generations and time, while the whirligig clacks in the ocean breeze. A dying old woman who has seen more death, uglier death than the world should be able to hold, and her granddaughter, a girl who does not smile, are united by the whirligig. Grandma keeps this whirligig in her mind, to use as a charm to ward off bad thoughts and to make her laugh. She offers its power to Jenny. The way to honor the dead is to laugh. Lea and Brent have touched two more lives.



Chapter 9, "Everybody Swing!"

Chapter 9, "Everybody Swing!" Summary

Brent tries a bed-and-breakfast and finds the social demands too great. There is too much need to explain himself, and there are too many lies he has to tell. He gets a ride north with a guest. He sees a billboard for a campground on Casco Bay and climbs out at the village of Weeksboro, Maine. The past is palpable here, on a plaque that names Weeksboro's fallen Union soldiers on a gravestone dated 1798. People died young then, Brent notices, like Lea. The signs for the campground are laid out on the way. The first offers free mosquitoes, and by the fourth, there's a list of office hours from "Whenever We Feel Like It Till We Don't." Brent veers off down a path by the water to see where it goes, and he finds a good campsite, secluded so he does not need to hide his work. It occurs to him that he has kept to coasts, although Lea's mother did not mention that he should do so. He takes a newspaper offered by a sign in the empty office, turns to the weather page and imagines the whirligigs, each in its own weather. It is as if he can see them, with people passing and the birds overhead. Brent returns to the office, and now someone is there. The table at his campsite is new, made from stuff found at the dump, the campground owner says, as is half of his house and all of this office. Brent would not have known, since there is nothing Frankenstein about the construction. He returns to his site, ready to find the pattern for the last whirligig.

Brent cannot find the book. He imagines it still on the bus, on its way north, with Brent's notes now in the margins, one more in a chain of whirligig makers. As he looks through his stock, thinking what to do, the notion pops into his mind of a whirligig all his own, not from a plan. He is inspired by the campground owner and thinks he could make it from what he can scavenge, so he starts searching the beach. He does not notice the woman sitting there with her back against a rock until he almost trips over her. He apologizes and then sees the watercolors and the crab shell beside her. He looks at her painting and tells her it's great. She thinks it lacks the proper "ness," in this case, she explains, roughness to the touch, lightness and hollowness. He says that he paints a little, just sort of, thinking of his recent efforts. She says she is a sort-of artist, too. They sit together in silence. She mentions some music she heard on the radio that morning, a piece composed by Corelli in 1681. She thought it was amazing, all those centuries old and still listened to.

Brent wonders how long his whirligigs will last. She asks him what sort of art he does. She is delighted when he tells her, and she says that perhaps he'll become the Corelli of whirligigs. They talk for an hour, and when he gets back to his site, his pack is filled with his scavengings. He looks at the stars that night, friends he has not seen in a while, and then he wakes at dawn and sees a painterly sunrise, composed of ten shades of red, clouds and the play of the sun. When it ends, he sees the whirligig in his head.

Building the whirligig takes three and a half days. On Brent's breaks, he looks at the guides in the office to identify his shells or the birds he sees, writing the names in a



notebook. When it is finished, this whirligig is three times the size of the others, with pinwheels and propellers from scavenged debris. On this one, Lea's face is the best likeness of all, and for the first time, she has a slight smile. Maine summers are short, as Lea's life was. This memorial will give off sound and color all year, holding back the tide of death. It is a kinetic gravestone, and Lea will not be swallowed up. He wants to mount it at the painter's house, above the water on a treeless point across the water from the campground.

Brent carries the whirligig to the painter's house. It is unwieldy and conspicuous, and the breeze sets it in motion while he struggles. He holds his breath as she looks it over. She thinks it is wonderful. It makes her feel like a child, and she says it's like a one-man band for the eyes. They stroll around her grounds, discussing the best place to mount it. An hour later, Brent has removed a decrepit birdhouse from a metal pole and mounted the whirligig. They sit together on the porch, drinking lemonade and facing the whirligig and the long coast beyond. She asks who the girl is, although she tells him that he does not have to say. He says it is a girl who died in a car accident, in May. He is relieved that they are not facing each other, because then he says that he was the one who killed her and that he'd been drinking. He had actually been trying to kill himself, and he killed her instead, by accident. Brent feels like he is falling down stairs, unexpected and unstoppable. He has not told anyone that he was trying to kill himself, not the police, the psychologists or his parents.

The painter tries to find the words she needs, and Brent thinks he is glad she does not know his name. She tells him that from their chats she does not think he is a killer, and she knows from his art that he is not suicidal. We all consider suicide, she tells him, and we all make mistakes. She looks at Brent. "I could be wildly wrong. But my sense of you is that you're a good person, not a bad one." Brent has not considered that he might be like everyone else. That he could have done what he did and still be a good person is even more startling. The people who told him that he was forgiven were the people whose job it was, like priests and his parents. The painter forgave him freely. Does she know enough to forgive him? He tells her the story in detail.

Brent and the painter part soon after. Walking back to the campground, Brent looks toward Town Hall. It is lit up with a full parking lot. He walks over, hears music, pays the man and goes in. It looks like a sixties-commune reunion, all beads, beards and ponytails. The people dance as Brent watches, swirling to the caller's directions like a human whirligig. A young woman pulls him onto the floor, since they need one more couple. It takes him a while, because he's always been gawky, but he gets the steps. His partner calls this a "contradance," but to Brent it's his rite of reentry. When he wakes up in the morning, he has finished Lea's mother's tasks. The guilt is not gone. It will reside in him like ashes after a fire, unconsumed. Something has changed, though. He can imagine himself in Chicago, delivering the photographs and starting a new school in the fall. He sees a future, and he is up to it. He thinks of his whirligigs, meshed with each other in the same way as he interlocked their mechanisms, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. He sees that the world itself is a whirligig with its myriad parts invisibly linked. The hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carry motion across the globe and over the centuries.



Chapter 9, "Everybody Swing!" Analysis

Brent is, the reader learns, an artist. This whirligig, the one that comes from inside him, seems to be his truest memorial to Lea. It is very loud, very colorful and made of pieces of everything and anything. This whirligig is not an angel harping, not a whale blowing a spout with a mermaid and not a band of musicians. Instead, it is Lea, and it finally lets Lea's spirit free. This whirligig is not from a book or from notes in the margins. The whirligig comes entirely from Brent, and it finally restores Brent's spirit to himself. Perhaps this could not have happened without the artist, a clear-eyed adult with no obligation to like him, admire his work, acknowledge their shared humanity or see him as good. She is there at the right moment, and she does all these things without obligation. Brent marks this moment by doing something he could not possibly have done before this. He goes where people are having a party, and he simply joins them. He learns dance steps he does not know and does poorly. He gets better, and he stays until the last waltz.

Brent can face his future. It is a hard thing to know that every reason he has to live was bought by Lea's death. This is a weight he will carry, and her death will mean something to him, as it will to all those people touched by their whirligigs, his and Lea's, in the whirligig world.



Characters

Brent Bishop

Brent Bishop is an eleventh grader who turns seventeen just after this story begins. His family has moved four times in seven years while his father climbs the corporate ladder. Some things about him depend on what is cool where he is now, such as the ear in which he wears his earring - the left one here - and the radio stations that play on the headset he always wears, on his head or around his neck. He has always had a bad temper, and letting the music flow into him is the only way he can tame it. He has straight blond hair, combed back and moussed the night of the party that starts the events of this story in a style inspired by *GQ Magazine*. He wears pressed khakis and a Chicago Bulls t-shirt for the party, with the chain from his wallet attached to a belt loop and the wallet in his pocket. His Vuarnet sunglasses are in the front pocket of his t-shirt. He describes himself as tall, a little skinny, a bit uncoordinated, with a square chin and no braces or acne. He lies easily and often about his history, the kind of lies that will never be found out. Over the years, he's grown adept at creating alternate pasts for himself.

Brent has spent too many years being hyper-vigilant to the kids around him so that he can read all the cues right. He wants to fit in, be popular and have friends. His family keeps moving around, though, and as soon as he knows what is going on in one place they are moving to the next. Brent has never developed a sense of humor - "a luxury he couldn't afford" - which might help ease his way. He does not have much by way of inner resources, either. He kills time with video games or music, and he does think of it as "killing" time. He picks up his friend Jonathan, who has invited him to tag along to a party at Chaz's house. Brent is very formal for a guy his age, and he is not entirely sure about coming uninvited. This party could really make his life good if he does well, though. Chaz is the de facto leader of the class, and the cream of the Montfort School's eleventh grade will be there, including Brianna, a beautiful, long-haired blonde whose affections would give Brent instant respect with the group. Brent has put a lot of pressure on himself for this party before he has even arrived.

Brent drinks scotch at the party to calm his nerves. He is dressed wrong, since Jonathan forgot the party has a theme. Chaz pushes Brent around, with his hands on Brent's shoulders, and then Brianna turns on him, screaming at Brent to leave her alone and stop being a leech. Brent freezes like a deer in headlights. He thinks Chaz is laughing at him when Chaz makes it into a joke, throws a punch at Chaz, misses and then tears out of the party and back to the car. He starts to drive home, knowing that he has just committed social suicide. He is profoundly humiliated, drunk, lost, enraged and very, very tired of his life. He just wants to die, and he takes his hands off the wheel and closes his eyes.

He is not badly hurt in the accident he causes, but another driver dies. She is eighteen, an honor student, a musician, a hospital volunteer, a loving girl with a future and



everything Brent knows he is not. The judge is lenient, but the girl's mother, Mrs. Zamora, imposes restitution on Brent. She gives him a purpose: He is to keep Lea's spirit alive by sending it into the world. She wants him to make four whirligigs with Lea's image and name and plant them at the four corners of the country. Then, he is to photograph each whirligig and deliver the photos to her when he returns. Brent needs to leave his life and mark his guilt with something bigger and more fitting than the probation demanded by the judge. He says yes.

Brent sees new things in the world and discovers new things in himself as he travels alone and learns to make whirligigs. He finds ways to manage his temper, and he discovers curiosity and a desire to learn. He teaches himself to play the harmonica and to know the stars in the sky, the shells on the beach and the birds all around him. He struggles to make the whirligigs worthy. The second is more difficult than the first, and the third is still more difficult. By the time he is ready to make the last whirligig, he has lost the whirligig book he used to find patterns, and the design is entirely his own creation. It is the best likeness of Lea, the truest representation of her spirit and an evocative work of art - the whirligig with the power to hold back her death. This last whirligig, the one that sets Lea's spirit free, is the one that finally gives Brent's spirit back to him. He is changed by the time he is finished with Mrs. Zamora's task. He will always feel guilt for Lea's death. It will reside in him like ashes after a fire, unconsumed. He can imagine himself in Chicago, though, starting a new school in the fall. He sees a future, and he is up to it. Brent thinks of his whirligigs, meshed with each other in the same way as their mechanisms interlock, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. He sees that the world itself is a whirligig, with its myriad parts invisibly linked, the hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carrying motion across the globe and over the centuries.

Lea Rosalia Santos Zamora

Lea is the girl that Brent kills accidentally when he tries to kill himself. She is driving the car that hits him when he spins away from the divider. She was eighteen, the daughter of Cesar and Tamara, a senior in high school, an honor student, a member of student council, in the orchestra and on the track team. She was active in the Filipino community and a volunteer at Resurrection Hospital. She was going to spend the coming summer doing volunteer work in California, and she was going to college in Boston in the fall. She was born in the Philippines, where her mother had been teaching English when she met and married Lea's father. She was her grandfather's first grandchild. Her grandfather was a carpenter who made lots of wooden toys for her when she was little. Her favorite was a whirligig he made her, of a girl that looks like her with arms that spin in the wind. It is on a pole in the yard, where hundreds of people have noticed it, stopping to smile.



Jonathan Kovitz

Jonathan is a new friend from the Montfort School who lives not far from Brent. He is lanky and loose-jointed as a clown. He is a friend of Chaz, and he is bringing Brent to Chaz's party even though Brent was not formally invited. He reassures Brent that any friend of his is a friend of Chaz's. He forgets that he and Brent are supposed to wear black and white to the party, which infuriates Brent.

Chaz

Chaz is the de facto ruler of the eleventh grade at the Montfort School. He is tall and long-jawed, bigger and more muscled than Brent, with curly, sandy-blond hair. He is the host of the party to which Jonathan brings Brent. The cream of the class is at the party. His stone house is vast and turreted, with a back patio and large back lawn with a gazebo. The theme of his party is a human chess game with everyone dressed in black or white, and he wears a crown. He teases Brent for not dressing appropriately, noting that Brent's last name is Bishop. He puts his hands on Brent's shoulders and maneuvers him the way a bishop moves in chess. Chaz makes light of it when Brianna yells at Brent. Brent thinks he is being cruel and resents Chaz touching him, so he throws a punch at Chaz that misses. Chaz's crown drops to the lawn, where Brent kicks it viciously before he runs off.

Brianna

Having Brianna for a girlfriend would mean instant respect for Brent. She is a beautiful, popular girl, with long, wavy, blond hair that reaches down her back like a hanging garden. She has recently broken up with somebody, and her father is rumored to be worth one hundred million dollars. Brent stays at the party when he sees that he is dressed wrong only because she is there, and this is a chance to talk with her without the risk of asking her out. She smiles at him on and off in school, and they have been assigned to the same group project in history. He has offered her help in math, his best subject. He tries to chat with her at the party. Her answers are curt, but he follows her. She stops short, squeezes her eyes shut, turns and screams at Brent, "Stop hanging all over me!" She tells him he's like a leech or something. He is profoundly humiliated.

Alexandra

Alexandra is an eighth-grader in Weeksboro, Maine. She is tall, blond and beautiful, and she has had a boyfriend named Trevor for three weeks and six days. She is Steph's best friend, and she has been since nursery school. She takes Steph on a walk to lead her in guided imagery in sight of the fourth whirligig, which she believes to symbolize all unseen forces in the universe. She has recently aced a test after having visualized doing so at this very spot.



Steph

Steph, short for Stephanie, is an eighth-grader in Weeksboro, Maine. She describes herself as puny in every department, with freckles and oily, drab, brown hair, although Alexandra, her best friend since nursery school, thinks she is funny, intelligent, loyal and brilliant. Alexandra leads Steph to the site of the fourth whirligig, which Alexandra believes is a device that channels all unseen forces. She intends to lead Steph in some guided imagery to find Steph a boyfriend. Steph relates this story from three years in the future. The little boy who stumbles on Steph and Alexandra that day leads them to his brother, who has been Steph's boyfriend ever since. In recognition of the whirligig's possible enchantment, or in tribute to what followed, she maintains the whirligig and plans to continue doing so.

Mrs. Tamara Zamora

Mrs. Zamora is Lea's mother. She is a large redhead in an Indian-print skirt, with a dozen necklaces jangling on her chest, including pendants with astrological signs and a Native American sun symbol. Her wavy hair flows exuberantly over her shoulders, making the rest of her seem only half alive. She was teaching English in the Philippines when she met and married her husband, still there when Lea was born. She believes that everything happens for a reason, including her daughter's death. She believes that the universe required this for some reason.

Miss Gill

Miss Gill is the court mediator. The last item of Brent's sentence, imposed by the judge, is that the victim's family is entitled to a meeting to discuss restitution. When Mrs. Zamora agrees to meet with Brent, the probation officer informs his parents. Miss Gill, young, black and soft-voiced, is the mediator between Mrs. Zamora and Brent. She begins the meeting by telling them all that we can never know all the consequences of our acts, and then she asks Mrs. Zamora to describe the results of Lea's death. Miss Gill reviews possibilities for restitution, such as a written apology, service to a charity the Zamoras choose or service to the Zamoras. When Mrs. Zamora tells Brent what she wants him to do, Miss Gill reminds them all that restitution can only be agreed to, not imposed.

The Canadian

The Canadian is a tall, fit, bearded man in his thirties with a thoughtful, sunburned face. He allows Brent to share his campsite at the park in Seattle, Washington, which is already full for the July Fourth holiday when Brent arrives. He is from Prince George in British Columbia, bicycling down the Pacific Coast, studying, he says, the strange behavior of the natives. He teaches Brent to play Go, and he is leaving as Brent wakes up the next morning.



Flaco

Although Flaco is just a nickname the Miami resident was given by waitresses at a restaurant because he is so skinny, it is the only name this man gives when he tells his story. His family moved to Miami from Puerto Rico when he was eleven. He is a man who loves peace and quiet, but whose life keeps get noisier. His family has gone from small and peaceful to big, noisy and quarrelsome. He lives with his wife and son, her mother, her grandparents and a teenage cousin from New Jersey. The teenager plays rock and roll loud on the radio all day. The half-deaf grandfather has the TV on loud while he plays dominoes with his friend. His wife takes care of five babies each day who cry. Everyone fights, and Flaco dreams of the shearwater bird, which spends its life flying over the ocean.

One day, Flaco decides to take a drive, and he does not stop until he is at the Gulf Coast. On his way to a pier he passes a restaurant, with a sign made of a little wooden band composed of four musicians. At the end of the pier is a fishing boat, and its captain has seen many shearwater birds. He lets Flaco come on a fishing trip for half price, and he points out the shearwater birds when they are far from land. Flaco is saddened, since the birds fly together in a flock, noisily fighting over fish. He passes the sign with the little wooden band on the way back to his car. He thinks about how people, like birds, live in groups. The groups can be noisy, and maybe everyone fights. Sometimes the people in the group are good together, and then they make music. He realizes that he is part of his family like the bird in its flock and like these wooden musicians in their band. Now he drives a street sweeper through the peace and silence of early morning in Miami. He is ready for the noise and traffic that follow, with music he likes on a tape player, ready for when he needs it.

Constancia

Constancia is Flaco's wife. They met when she was eighteen, the most beautiful of the waitresses where they both worked. She gave some of her tips to the dishwashers and busboys, but she gave him the most. They marry and are very happy for a while, for she is as kind as she is beautiful. They have a baby girl, and their joy increases. The girl dies when she is twelve months old. Constancia changes. She stops laughing and smiling and just watches TV with a face so expressionless that it is like a statue at church. After a year they have another child, a son. She is not made happy as she was at the birth of her girl, but instead she is anxious and worried. She cleans compulsively, and she sprays an anti-bacterial on everything. She starts taking care of working mothers' children when her husband loses his job, and she is now taking care of five.

Emil

Emil is a German student traveling before he starts college in the fall. Brent spends a day with him in San Diego. He is eighteen and tall, with strawberry-blond hair. He and Brent look much alike, and they could be mistaken for each other at a distance. He



speaks three languages, and he speaks English with no accent at all. His parents are teachers. He plans to study biology, and he offers a running commentary on the animals they see at the San Diego Zoo. He leads Brent in and out of museums during the afternoon, and he is the only person his own age Brent has ever met who goes to a museum voluntarily. Brent finds the paperback of *Two Years Before the Mast* that Emil has left for him with his address when he awakes the next morning.

Tony

Tony, called "Anthony" by his mother, is Korean by birth. He was adopted by his American parents, brought from the Korean orphanage when he was a baby. It is the first day of fifth grade, and Tony is writing an essay about how he spent his summer vacation. As far as he is concerned, it was like being sick to your stomach. For his birthday, he asks for a baseball mitt, a remote-controlled car, a Nintendo and a gift certificate to Sam's Sports Cards. He gets two shirts, a microscope, a new music stand and a Sarah Chang CD. His parents put a lot of pressure on him. His father is an electrical engineer, so Tony is sent to science camp for part of the summer. His mother thinks that his being Korean means that he should be a violin virtuoso. He is not, and he hates the lessons, the practice, the youth orchestras and everything else. The family does go camping during the summer, a short trip just a little north of their home in Bellevue, Washington. They go to a nice campground on the ocean in Seattle.

A whirligig there ruins Tony's trip. It depicts a girl playing the harp, and since it is windy while they are there, she plays all the time. His mother thinks the whirligig is so inspirational that she takes pictures of it with Tony standing under it. Tony hates whoever put it there. His mother catches him trying to knock it down with a rock (Tony's a good pitcher, and he loves baseball more than anything.), and she makes him stay in the tent the next day. She blows up one of the whirligig pictures, and she takes down a baseball poster to put it on Tony's wall. She tells Tony to be like the harpist and practice all the time. Tony is supposed to spend August preparing for a recital, but since his mother is working, he gets away with not practicing. Mr. Mintz, Tony's teacher, who accompanies him on piano, knows immediately that he is not prepared, and so does everyone in the audience. Tony tells Mr. Mintz about everything, including the whirligig. Mr. Mintz calls Tony's mother in to speak with her. He tells her that there is another lesson to learn from the whirligig. As the Chinese saying teaches, rest gives strength to activity. Everything that works must rest, just like the whirligig, which would break if the harpist never stopped. After that, Tony does not have to play violin again. Just like being sick to the stomach, you feel great after it's over. That was his summer vacation.

Jenny

Jenny is Jewish girl who lives in San Diego. Possibly to put her grandmother's experience of Auschwitz far behind them, her parents have worked very hard to assimilate. They never go to synagogue, never talk about the Holocaust, gave their daughter a very modern first name and even have Christmas trees. This has pushed



Jenny in the other direction. She enrolled herself in Hebrew School, just had a Bat Mitzvah last year, though she was much older than the other kids, and gave all her money from that birthday to Simon Wiesenthal's Nazi hunters. She reads all the Holocaust literature she can find, and she is reading Anne Frank's letters when her story opens. Her mother thinks she should smile more, especially if she wants boys to like her.

Jenny only has her learner's permit, but she is the only one at home when her grandmother, who lives with them now, insists on going for a drive. It turns out that Grandma wants to see certain things - like the only birch tree in the neighborhood, reminiscent of all the birch trees she knew as girl in Poland - for the last time, because she knows she will die soon. The last place she wants to see, she says, is for both her and Jenny. It is a whirligig of a whale with a mermaid that rides atop its spout, and it goes up and down and clacks in the ocean breeze. This whirligig makes Grandma laugh, and she wants Jenny to see it so she remembers to laugh, too. Grandma wants her to know that the dead of Auschwitz want people to laugh all the laughs they cannot and that laughter is the best way to honor the dead.

Grandma

Grandma is a Survivor, someone who was in a concentration camp and lived. She had a life, with her own apartment, friends and a busy schedule, but one year ago she moved in with her daughter's family because she was unwell. Today, she wants to go out, and Jenny must take her because no one else is home. She is dying, and she believes this is the last time she will be able to go for such a ride. Her granddaughter is nervous, since she has only a learner's permit to drive, but Grandma insists. She directs Jenny to the block with a birch tree, a beautiful tree that reminds her of all the birch trees of her girlhood in Poland. She has Jenny drive through her old neighborhood to revisit scenes from other days, when Jenny's mother was a girl and Grandma's own sister was alive. Finally, she directs Jenny to a house with a whirligig at a corner of its porch. It makes her laugh. She tells Jenny that as she is dying and that if bad thoughts come into her head, she wants the image of this whirligig to be fresh, so that she can vanquish those bad thoughts and put this in their place. She tells her very serious granddaughter that the people who died in concentration camps want the living to remember them not by being solemn, but by laughing all the laughs that they could not. She tells Jenny that laughter is the best way to honor the dead, calling her granddaughter the girl who has the permit to learn. She is old, and she has a license for teaching.

The Artist

Brent meets the artist the first day he is in Weeksboro, Maine, when he walks from his campsite to the beach to scavenge material for his last whirligig. She is sitting against a rock, painting, and he does not see her until he almost trips over her. When the last whirligig is eventually completed, he looks across the water from his campsite to her

house and knows it is the place to mount this whirligig. He carries it to her, and she thinks it is wonderful. Together, they find a place for it.

After the whirligig is mounted, they sit on her porch and drink lemonade. She asks Brent who the girl is whose face is painted on the whirligig. Brent tells her, and then, for the first time, he tells the whole story of the accident, that it was his fault, that he was drinking and that he was trying to kill himself. The artist thinks carefully before she speaks. She tells him that from their chats she does not think he is a killer, and she knows from his art that he is not suicidal. We all consider suicide, she tells him, and we all make mistakes. Her sense of Brent is that he is a good person. Brent has not considered that he might be like everyone else, and certainly not that he could have done what he did and still be a good person. Unlike his parents and the social workers in Chicago, the painter is not obliged to forgive him, but she does. Brent and the artist never exchange names, but her acceptance is key to giving Brent the knowledge that he can face his future.



Objects/Places

The Montfort School

The Montfort School is the expensive private school that Brent attends in Chicago. Brent had thought that his family was rich because they could send him to private school, but he is poor compared to the kids there.

Brent's Sentence

Brent is sentenced to probation instead of serving time at the detention center. His probation includes alcohol counseling, therapy for depression and volunteering in an emergency room. The final item the judge imposes is a meeting with the victim's family, if they so desire, to discuss restitution.

Restitution

A meeting to discuss restitution is an option the judge makes available to the Zamoras as part of Brent's sentence. To Brent's great surprise, Mrs. Zamora agrees. He and his parents meet with Mrs. Zamora in a building downtown, with Miss Gill there to represent the interests of the court and to mediate. Some of the possibilities for retribution include money, a written apology to each family member, service to a charity of the Zamoras choice or service to the Zamoras, themselves. Mrs. Zamora does not believe in retribution. She has lived in the Philippines, where she went to teach English and where she met and married her husband, Lea's father. With the rebel fighting there, she saw what "an eye for an eye" looks like. Mr. Zamora does not feel as she does.

Mrs. Zamora has given much thought to what Brent could do to make restitution. She sees no point in having him mow their lawn all summer or paint the house. She wants him to do something that has a purpose. She wants him to spread Lea's loving, joyful spirit in the world by making whirligigs, one for Brent to put at each corner of the country. She has brought a Greyhound bus pass and a picture of Lea for Brent. Miss Gill explains that restitution cannot be imposed. Instead, it must be agreed upon, and Brent's parents think Mrs. Zamora's proposal is ridiculous. Brent, however, agrees.

The Whirligig Book

Brent searches through six bookstores until he finds an old, loose-spined hardback called *Make Your Own Whirligigs and Weather Vanes* in a dingy used-book shop downtown on Wabash Avenue. The margins are filled with tiny, careful, masculine-looking notes in pencil. Brent uses the book for the first three whirligigs, adding his own notes describing his innovations. He cannot find the book in Weeksboro, Maine, and he thinks it was left on the bus. He imagines the book riding off into its future, with Brent's



notes added to the notes in the margin, and that he is one more whirligig-maker in the life of the book. The book, like the whirligigs, has a life of its own, touching many people and creating a community of lives across time and distance.

Ouija Walking

Ouija walking is a technique invented by Alexandra, in which one walks without any conscious plan, letting your feet go where they will.

Lea's First Whirligig

Made by Lea Zamora's grandfather, the whirligig is Lea's favorite among the many toys he made her. It is shaped like a girl with arms that spin in the wind. He painted the face to look like her. It has been on a pole in the Zamora's yard for many years. Hundreds of people have noticed it over the years, and they have stopped and smiled.

Photograph of Lea Rosalia Santos Zamora

Lea's mother gives Brent a photograph of Lea, on the back of which she has written her daughter's name. Lea looks Hawaiian to Brent. Her skin is the color of cinnamon, smooth as sanded wood. Her forehead is high, and her hair is long and straight, drawn to the side with a clip. Her eyes are faintly Asian. Her dress, or perhaps it is just a blouse, is white with a pattern embroidered on the bodice. She wears a fine gold chain, and whatever hangs from it is hidden. She smiles at something off to the side.

The Whirligig in Seattle, Washington

The Seattle whirligig is the first whirligig Brent makes. It takes him two days. He makes it at the park where his campsite is. It is derived from the simplest whirligig in his book, of an angel with wings playing a harp. Brent accidentally snaps off a big chunk of the angel's wing, however, and decides that the figure will just be a girl playing a full-size harp. It is painted on its two sides with Lea's face and dark hair, and Lea's name is drawn down an edge. The whole whirligig is varnished when complete. Brent mounts it on a piece of driftwood, and he mounts the driftwood on the almost-horizontal limb of a tree in the waterfront park, in a place where the wind can find it. When the wind blows through it, the figure's arms turn, and it appears to be playing the harp.

The whirligig is seen some time later by an adopted Korean boy who hates having to play the violin and by his mother who pressures him. She uses the whirligig to teach the boy that he must always practice, just like the girl playing the harp. His teacher uses it to teach the boy's mother that everything must rest after it works, for if the whirligig spun all the time it would surely break.



The Whirligig in San Diego, California

The second whirligig takes three days of intense concentration, frustration and education. Brent makes it at a park not too far from the youth hostel at which he is staying. It is a spouting whale operated by a propeller and rods, with Lea as a mermaid at the top of the spout. He mounts it on the hostel's porch. The wind that blows each afternoon sends the whale's white spout up and down, with the mermaid on top like a bronc rider.

An old woman, who was in Auschwitz, and her very serious granddaughter see the whale and mermaid whirligig some time later. The old woman wants it fresh in her mind as charm to ward away bad thoughts that might come to her while she dies, which will be soon. She shares it with her granddaughter to teach her that the people who died in Hitler's concentration camps want us to laugh all the laughs that were taken away from them, and she says that these victims are best honored by laughter.

The Whirligig in Beale Beach, Florida

The third whirligig is a band, a drummer, a trumpet player, a clarinetist and a trombone player. It is a leap beyond the second whirligig, with more figures, a six-bladed propeller and a much more complex system of rods and pivots that makes the instruments dip and rise as if the musicians were marching. Brent makes his own innovation to the design so that their instruments do not rise and fall in unison. He believes the staggered motion gives it a more exciting rhythm. There is no wind on the beach the day it is completed, so Brent tests it with the air four children blow on it. He makes it on a picnic table behind a boarded-up ice cream shop at the edge of a small town on the Gulf of Mexico. It is a place where summer is the off season, on a deserted stretch of beach, desolate except for some children whose interest he piques. He affixes the whirligig to the metal frame on which he had put palm fronds to shade him, and he tells the four children who are there when he finishes that it is for them.

The band whirligig is seen some time later nailed to the outside wall of a restaurant on a pier, a little wooden marching band, now with an arrow under it pointing to the front door that says, "March On In." It teaches the man who sees it that as birds live in flocks, people live in families. Sometimes they fight, but sometimes they get along and even make music, like the wooden band.

The Whirligig in Weeksboro, Maine

The Maine whirligig is perched at the edge of a cliff beyond a house. It is as big as a box kite. Brent makes it at a campground and carries it to the house of an artist he met on the beach. She removes an old birdhouse from its pole, and Brent mounts it there. This whirligig is not made from a pattern because Brent lost the whirligig book. It is entirely a design that he conceives. He creates it from what wood he has left and much that he scavenges from the beach and the town dump. It is many different colors. It



resembles nothing in particular, except at the top where it looks like a woman's head, and it is the best likeness of Lea, the only one in which she has a small smile. There are three reflectors attached to her hair, and shells and chimes hang around her neck. When the wind blows it appears to gesticulate wildly with moving arms, vanes, wheels and propellers large and small. The wind passing through it sets off a flurry of fluttering, shimmering and ringing, as if a flock of exotic birds were taking flight. It is the whirligig that fights off death, the one that sets Lea's spirit free and gives Brent's back to him.

The last whirligig is seen some time later in the same place, although many of the parts are now stuck and cannot move, and the artist no longer resides in the house. It is seen by two girls for whom it is magic.

Setting

Brent Bishop lives in an affluent home in contemporary Chicago. His dad has been steadily moving up in the corporate world and can now bankroll the lifestyle Brent's parents want, a private school for Brent, an expensive house, cars, all the "right" things to make life happy. There is an inner restlessness, dissatisfaction, and feeling of isolation in Brent that his dad's money cannot fix.

Whirligig moves Brent from Chicago, via Greyhound bus, on a circumventing journey of the United States: Washington, California, Florida, and Maine.

Brent meets obnoxious and unsavory people on the bus and in cheap hotels, but makes a friend in a youth hostel in San Diego who gives him a copy of *Two Years before the Mast*. The camaraderie enjoyed by the transient residents of the hostel attracts Brent. He begins looking at his fellow travelers differently. The jostling bus ride around the country affords him much time for reflection and self-examination.

Social Sensitivity

Young people are at a place in their lives where they are searching to know who they are. What kind of persons do they want to be? How can they become those persons?

How can they make their lives count for something? Young people reject the phoniness they sometimes see in adults around them. Readers will see these same issues in the protagonist of *Whirligig*. From Brent's mistakes and searching, they may learn new ways to look at themselves.

Sometimes young people turn to drugs, alcohol, sex, or material possessions to find satisfaction and meaning in their lives. Readers will see that Brent looked to the same things for answers but found them in places he never imagined. Perhaps they will look in other places for answers, too.

They may feel rejected, isolated, or without friends, like Brent. There are ways to restore their self-esteem, earn friendships, become friends themselves, and receive acceptance that they, like Brent, can discover.

Literary Qualities

Fleischman uses a first person narrative and an unusual plot construction. Unexpectedly, the reader finds himself reading about two young girls in Maine and a ritual one of them has developed to bring a special boy into the life of her best friend. The girls seat themselves under the whirligig constructed and installed by Brent, the last of the four he built. The story flashes forward in reverse chronological order to four separate stories about the encounters of people and the whirligigs.

The whirligigs of the story become a metaphor for Brent's life as it flashes, twists, and turns, in chaotic disorder. Then order is restored as he fashions each whirligig and finds just the right spot for it. The whirligigs take on lives of their own as they affect the lives of individuals in each location.

An economy of language utilizes tangible metaphors as seen in an example taken from "The Afterlife." "The headaches, like a wrecking ball working on his skull, came less often, replaced by the endless tolling in his mind of the word murderer." Another example is found in "Everybody Swing!"

"He felt empty inside, like a chicken from the store with its plastic bag of organs removed."

There are a couple of instances of profanity, but they are not contrived. They help the reader better understand the situation and character.



Themes

Restitution and Punishment

Whirligig has much to say about the nature of punishment and retribution in the Brent chapters. The first chapter sets up the event from which everything else in the book results, directly or indirectly. Brent tries to kill himself, although he admits that to no one until near the very end of his story. He fails to kill himself and can hardly believe that he tried, but he kills someone else in the attempt. He was drunk at the time, which makes him liable legally for the consequences. He is relieved that he does not have to serve a sentence at a detention center, but he also feels an "unanswered hunger" that he recognizes as a need for punishment. He needs to leave his family and his previous life behind. He needs some something dramatic, to acknowledge the "murderous machine" he set in motion, as he thinks of it when Mrs. Zamora talks about how Lea's death affected her family.

Mrs. Zamora does not believe in retribution. She has seen the consequences in the Philippines of an eye for an eye. She tries to think of a fitting restitution, but what should Brent do for her? Mowing her lawn or painting her house cannot begin to pay for the loss of her daughter. She thinks, and she thinks, until finally she knows what Brent must do, the purpose he must take from her. He must do something to keep Lea's spirit alive and send it out all over the country, where she would have taken it, herself, had she lived. Brent thinks of Lea everywhere he goes and whatever he does. Her presence is very real to him. Anything that could make him think of her does make him think of her, including a poster for a lost child and graves marking people whose lives were short. He feels her watching over him while he makes the whirligigs.

Mrs. Zamora's plan, the restitution she asks of Brent, is extraordinary. By charging him with spreading Lea's spirit, the spirit that he took from her, she enables him to discover his own. At the moment when he needs these very things, she gives Brent a path away from his world, an activity on which to focus his attention and a way for him to find some meaning in his profoundly meaningless act. When Brent knows that his task for Mrs. Zamora is complete, he knows that the guilt will be with him always, like ashes after a fire, unconsumed. He can live with that now and face his future with hope because of Mrs. Zamora's wisdom.

Learning to Be Alone

Brent seems never to have spent any time alone that he did not fill with something that runs on electricity. Time he spends alone is time that is an enemy. In the first chapter, he talks about killing time, about how time is a drag and about wishing it could pass as it does when he fast-forwards through a video. Time is something he has too much of when he is by himself. The first night at the campsite, he meets the Canadian. He watches the bearded musician at the hostel and then spends time with Emil. Brent finds



himself admiring people for unfamiliar reasons. He has admired people in the past, at school, for being admired by others. He admires these people for knowing things and knowing how to do things.

As soon as Brent understands this, he figures out how he can apply these lessons to himself. He acquires a harmonica and instruction book, and he teaches himself to play. He acquires a star guide, and he studies the skies at night, searching out stars and saying their names to himself. He learns the names of the shells on the beach in Florida from the little boy, and he writes them down in a book. In Maine, he uses the campground office guidebooks to look up the names of the shells he finds on the beach for the whirligig and the birds he sees all around him. Ultimately, it seems that what he learns is curiosity, a way of looking at the world and seeing what is there.

Before very long, Brent discovers that he has just as much time as he needs. He does not want to kill time. Instead, he wants to fill time. He has no electricity and no batteries for toys to entertain him. He learns how to entertain himself. He makes his own music, and he reads. Being open to what is around him allows him to see how it all connects, which leads to his sudden comprehension, for example, that the tilt of the sun gives us seasons and day-lengths that vary. Brent can be alone now, which will make him, ironically, much better company when he rejoins the world.

The Whirligig World

The overarching theme of *Whirligig* is the one that gives its name to the title. Miss Gill, the court mediator, begins the restitution meeting by telling the participants that we never know all the consequences of our acts because they reach into places we cannot see, and into the future, where no one can see. The author can, however, see the future, and before Brent's car has bounced off the median, one of his whirligigs in Maine, hundreds of miles and years away, has touched the lives of two girls. Brent feels this interconnectivity as his summer goes on. He rides buses that he knows have been ridden before, on which there is always a drunk in back and a woman up front who keeps asking the driver if she is on the right bus. Brent knows he is part of the continuum of whirligig makers with the book to whose notes he has added, traveling on without him, and in the boy at Beale Beach, who is inspired by Brent to make a piece of wood spin. He thinks about how everything we do - good, bad and indifferent - sends a wave rolling out of sight. He wonders what his own accounting will look like, generations later. Some of that is revealed to the reader. In between every chapter about Brent is a chapter about one person or two or three who are touched, at some time in the future, by what Brent has done or will do, and each of those persons will touch many more.

Brent knows this explicitly at his story's end. As he has opened up to the world in the course of this trip, he has seen many connections he would never have noticed before. Emil left the book he was reading for Brent, and now Brent has read it, then traded it for another at a campground's book exchange, making him part of the chain of both books. When he looks at a newspaper weather map for the country, it is as if he sees his whirligigs, each in its weather, with people passing below and birds flying above. He has



been interlocking the blades of the whirligigs, so the turning of one mechanism passes its motion on to the others. "In his mind, the whirligigs were meshed the same way, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. The world itself was a whirligig, its myriad parts invisibly linked, the hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carrying motion across the globe and over the centuries."



Themes/Characters

That actions have consequences is the central theme of Whirligig. This theme is developed over and over as Brent travels to the four corners of the country to fulfill the request of Lea Zamora's mother. Good consequences follow the placement of the whirligigs just as surely as bad consequences follow Brent's reckless driving.

A second theme is isolation. Teens sometimes feel isolated from their peers. It may be for real or imagined reasons. Brent feels isolation because of frequent moves, making him the new kid. He seeks ways to fit in and avoid sticking out. Trying to fit in results in humiliation, something no one wants to experience, especially teens. Brent loses that sense of isolation through his encounters with various travelers and the new ways of thinking he gains from them.

He no longer feels the need to be a part of the "in crowd."

The physical journey parallels Brent's inward journey overcoming loss, fear, and guilt, emotions common to all people. Brent braced himself for the loss of freedom in case the judge sentenced him to jail. He feared being different and not fitting in but learned uniqueness is a good quality. He suffered terrible guilt and felt compelled to atone for that guilt. Guilt is an important emotion that teens may experience and not know what to do with the emotion. Brent seeks to salve that guilt through confession, apology, and atonement, a good pattern for others to imitate. Through his travels he finds peace and forgiveness for his actions and learns how to handle the guilt.

Sixteen-year-old Brent Bishop, protagonist, is a junior in high school. He is a self-centered young man who feels isolated from his peers. He is the new kid in class and feels inadequate and inferior. He has learned ways to "fit in." Thinking this time he has the right clothes, the right look, the right house and car, and enough money, he finds that, measured against the kids at Montfort, he is suddenly a lot poorer than before. By the end of Whirligig, the reader sees a different young man, still sixteen, but a lot more likeable.

Parents and high school friends are all very superficial people and work as background characters to the plot, as do several characters Brent meets on his journey around the country.

Individual protagonists in alternating chapters tell their own stories about their encounters with the whirligigs constructed and installed by Brent, good consequences from his actions.

Style

Points of View

Every odd numbered chapter, from the first to the ninth, is in the third person. These chapters told from Brent's point of view by a narrator with a limited omniscient view, a narrator who knows Brent's thoughts but is not Brent. There is no information in those chapters that is not known to Brent, and no other thoughts except his. These chapters tell a story about Brent that progresses in time and place in a linear fashion. The other chapters vary in point of view.

The second chapter is about two girls, Steph and Alexandra, who are eighth graders. The chapter consists primarily of a dialogue between the two. Steph is telling the story, however, and she uses the first person in narrative she provides. The story takes place in real time until the end, when Steph reveals, in an epilogue, that the events just described took place three years ago.

The fourth chapter is an interior monologue from the perspective of the narrator, a Puerto Rican man who lives in Miami. It is a linear narrative about events of his life. The first-person narration provides access to the man's inner thoughts, and allows the reader to follow along with his search for peace and ultimate realizations about the human condition.

The sixth chapter is an interior monologue from the perspective of a boy writing an essay about his summer, on this, his first day in fifth grade. He imagines that he is a guest on Bob Baker's Seattle Mariners pre-game show. The chapter is written as interior monologue. It contains imagined exchanges with the Announcer, and includes lines from his essay as he writes.

The eighth chapter is told in the first person from the perspective of a girl, Jenny, who has a learner's permit to drive. She quotes herself and her grandmother in conversation, and she narrates her own story of discovery, led by her elderly grandmother. The first person perspective allows the reader to discover, along with the girl, the purpose of her journey with her grandmother.

Setting

The setting of the odd chapters moves around the country with Brent, starting in Chicago. The third chapter moves from Chicago to Seattle, Washington. The fifth chapter is set predominantly in San Diego, California, and the seventh is set in Beale Beach, on Florida's Gulf Coast. The ninth chapter takes place in the village of Weeksboro, Maine. From the third chapter to the last, all of the Brent chapters begin with Brent riding the bus, describing some of the places through which he travels and some places where he gets off for brief stops or to change buses. The even-numbered chapters are named for the places where their main characters live, and these chapters



follow characters on the journeys in which the whirligigs figure. Of these, setting of the second chapter, "Weeksboro, Maine," is the most vividly established by the cold, windy day during which it takes place.

Once Brent leaves Chicago, the places through which he travels, and especially where he builds the whirligigs, are described as he experiences them. It is summer during his travels. Weather is an issue only when the chill of a San Francisco summer day drives him out, which is described after it happens. What is most fully evoked is what touches Brent most. Some places and things touch him more than others. He is impressed by the mountains of the Cascades. He starts noticing stars, and then he begins noticing the skies in general. The longer he travels, the more aware he becomes of sunsets and sunrises, because he is opening up to the world around him. The place where he makes the whirligig in Florida is clearly evoked, hot and desolate, with a very bright sun.

Language and Meaning

The language is simple and straightforward. Speech and conversations are quoted. The chapters about Brent have comparatively little dialogue, consisting primarily of his interior monologues. Brent is defined, in part, by unsociability. He does not wish to speak with people because he cannot yet tell them the truth, and he does not wish to lie. The scarcity of dialogue helps establish Brent as someone who must learn to live with himself, in his own head, before he can return to society.

The language of two of the chapters is different. "Miami, Florida," the fifth chapter, is in the first person. It is a story told by a Miami man in his early twenties. He is from Puerto Rico, poorly educated, and English is not his first language. The author's use of language in this chapter reflects the English that such a man might speak. It does not patronize him or suggest that his thoughts are simple, but the sentences are simple in structure and short. There are more sentence fragments than are used elsewhere, such as "For a while, anyway," and "One from Puerto Rico."

"Bellevue, Washington," the sixth chapter, is also in the first person. As in "Miami, Florida," the author uses sentence fragments to convey the way people actually speak and think. In this case, the narrator is a fifth grader. As he tells his story, other people's voices are filtered through his own. He does not quote these other people, particularly his mother and his violin teacher. He describes what they have said, emphasizing their words to convey his sense of them. While introducing himself, for example, he describes all his violin commitments, and something his mother has said to him: "I can do anything, *if I apply myself.*" The italics convey his intonation, suggesting the many times she has said this to him and his own knowledge that it is not true.

Structure

The book is composed of nine chapters. The first begins before dinner on the night of Brent's party and ends as he attempts suicide. The third chapter describes events in Brent's life after the accident he has caused and the making of the first whirligig. The



fifth, seventh and ninth chapters correspond to Brent's making the second, third and fourth whirligigs. The second, fourth, sixth and eighth chapters are each different stories about individuals who encounter Brent's whirligigs. The stories are not specifically about the encounters or the whirligigs, although in each story the whirligig somehow facilitates a beneficial shift of perspective. The Brent chapters are linear in time. There is no way to ascertain the time of the other chapters, either relative to Brent or to each other, except that they all take place after Brent has come and gone. This structure, interlacing Brent's healing journey and the building of the whirligig with chapters that show the whirligigs' impact on others' lives, builds the fundamental concept that people in the world are all interrelated and that our actions affect others in ways we cannot know.



Quotes

"We're meeting today...to apologize, and to understand, and to atone....We never know all the consequences of our acts. They reach into places we can't see. And into the future, where no one can." Chapter 3, p. 38

"Birds don't live alone, I told myself. They live in flocks. Like people. People are always in a group. Like that little wooden band. And whenever there's a group, there's fighting. If the people in the group get along, maybe they make good music instead of arguing....That's how life is. I stared at that marching band. Then I got in the car and drove home." Chapter 4, p. 62

"This is his trip to take, not theirs." Chapter 5, p. 65

"By comparison, his own life seemed unfurnished with skills and interests. He desired to become the man he was impersonating." Chapter 5, p. 68

"The lies were piling up: that he was a coffee drinker, a Canadian, and, most serious, that he was a mere tourist, not a convicted killer on a mission of repentance. Not only his every word, but his every bite and breath was counterfeit. Prison, where no pretense was needed, suddenly seemed the better choice." Chapter 5, p. 69

"Brent thought back to Miss Gill...and her saying that the effects of an act traveled far beyond one's knowledge. He knew she'd meant harmful acts, like his. He saw now that the same could be said of good deeds, such as a teacher's years of inspiring. Everything we did - good, bad, and indifferent - sent a wave rolling out of sight. He wondered what his own accounting, generations later, would look like." Chapter 5, p. 71

"We were at the opposite ends of the house and of the life span." Chapter 8, p. 103

"I was the driver but hadn't understood the journey." Chapter 8, p. 112

"'Somebody,' she said, 'I don't know who, said there shouldn't be laughing after Auschwitz. That nobody could ever want to laugh again after the things that happened there.' She rotated her head toward me. 'But I was there, *kindeleh*. Yes, very terrible. What I saw you should never dream. But I can tell you that all those that died want that we should have a life with laughing. Not sad all the time, always reading books about Nazis and men who like killing. They want us to laugh all the laughs that were taken away from them.'" Chapter 8, p. 114

"But his clacking, flashing, jingling memorial would give off sound and color all year, holding back the tide of death. It was a kinetic gravestone, painted in ever-blooming greens and yellows and reds. Lea would not be swallowed up." Chapter 9, p. 125

"He'd interlocked some of the propeller blades so that one would pass its motion to the others. In his mind, his whirligigs were meshed the same way, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. The world itself was a whirligig, its myriad parts invisibly linked, the

hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carrying motion across the globe and over the centuries." Chapter 9, p. 132-3

Adaptations

Whirligig was taped on two audio cassettes by Robert Fielding and Lily Christian for Audio Bookshelf in 1998. It was been reviewed in Audio File, 1998.

Paul Fleischman has written many books for young adults with themes and plots that appeal to their emotional needs. In several he uses multiple voices as he has in Whirligig.

In *Graven Images: Three Stories* (1982) he explores themes of mystery, romance, and murder. *Saturnalia* (1990) has stories woven around the person of William, a Narragansett Indian boy in Boston in 1861, and contains the themes of oppression, courtship, and redemption. *Bull Run* (1993) is about twelve participants in the Civil War battle of Bull Run. The dozen tell about their involvement in that battle. In *Seedfolks* (1997) thirteen voices tell how a multiethnic neighborhood develops into a community where once there were disconnected lives and suspicions.

His poetry (*I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices*, *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, and *Big Talk: Poems for Four Voices*) speaks in multiple voices, also.

Young adult readers who enjoy Whirligig might also enjoy Fleischman's fantasy. In *Finzel the Farsighted* (1983), nearsighted Finzel can see into the future. Brent Bishop would have made a different choice on that fateful night had he been able to see into the future and the consequences of his choice. *A Fate Totally Worse Than Death* (1995) is a parody of horror stories. Like Brent, the young people in this story are focused on material things rather than relationships.

Fleischman has written several historical fiction novels. *Half-a-Moon Inn* (1980) involves mute Aaron in search of his mother when she fails to return home from an errand to the town market. Half frozen, he stumbles into the "Half-a-Moon Inn" and is forced to help the evil proprietor of the inn by picking pockets and prying into people's dreams. *Path of the Pale Horse* (1983) tells the tale of Lep, an apprentice to a doctor, who helps him care for yellow fever victims in Philadelphia during the 1793 epidemic. *The Borning Room* (1991) crosses generations when the protagonist describes her life in a house in Ohio where, for generations, a room to one side of the kitchen has been used as a room where new life enters and old life leaves this world.

Other titles with interesting plot constructions that will captivate the attention of young people are *Copier Creations* (1993), which tells readers how to use copy machines to make decals, silhouettes, flip books, film and much more, and *Mind's Eye* (1999), which is written entirely in dialogue. In the latter, a sixteen-year-old seeks love and acceptance. Her parents are dead and she has a spinal injury that prevents her ever walking again. She finds herself in a health care facility with two elderly women roommates, the one losing her eyesight and the other suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Facing despair, she finally allows herself to be led by the nearly blind roommate on an imaginary trip to Italy, as she reads an old guidebook to her. She also learns how to care about someone else.

Fleischman has also written three nonfiction books young adult readers might enjoy. Like Brent Bishop, naturalist John Townsend in *Townsend's Warbler* (1992), makes a cross-country journey. This book tells of his many discoveries, including the warbler that bears his name. *Dateline: Troy* (1996) offers a unique look at the Trojan War through modern day newspaper headlines. Fleischman edited *Cannibal in the Mirror* (2000), and it looks at the rites of passage from birth to death, comparing our culture with the rites of primitive cultures.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Brent initially rely on outward appearances and possessions to help him feel good about himself? What makes you feel good about yourself?

2. What does alcohol do to a person's ability to reason and make decisions?

3. How does the second chapter, "Weeksboro, Maine," fit into the story?

It is a flash forward. Explain what that means. How did Fleischman have to think about his writing to write these independent stories that intersperse Brent's story?

4. In "The Afterlife" chapter, Brent wants punishment, and his father wants to "get him off" with no time in jail. React to Brent's feelings of guilt, remorse, and disinterest in life.

5. What is probation? Does it only refer to the justice system?

6. Fleischman writes, "We never know all the consequences of our acts. They reach into places we can't see. And into the future, where no one can." What does this mean?

7. Do you remember doing something you did not think through that caused problems for yourself or someone else? What were the consequences? Did you have to make it right?

8. What is restitution? Restitution is part of Brent's probation sentence. What is atonement? How are restitution and atonement different?

9. Can the two words "I'm sorry" ever be enough? Explain. What would you ask of Brent for restitution?

10. Mrs. Zamora says she does not believe in retribution. What is it? How is it different from restitution?

11. Does everything happen for a reason?

What could possibly be the reason for the death of Lea, a talented, wonderful young person?

12. What is your reaction to Mrs. Zamora's request? Why did Brent or his parents not have to pay Brent's way? They could certainly afford it.

13. Fleischman uses the word *karass*. What does it mean? Have you experienced *karass*? Share your experience.

14. How do the chapters, "Miami, Florida"; "Bellevue, Washington"; and "San Diego, California" relate to Brent?



15. Emil, the German student Brent meets in San Diego, tells Brent his father's favorite quote, "A teacher lives forever through his students." Explain the meaning of this. How is this true of you and teachers in your life?

16. Brent thinks about his life in compartments. They are life before the accident, his first life, and life after the accident which he calls "The Afterlife." Can you explain his disconnected feelings?

17. In Bellevue, Washington, Anthony, an adopted Korean boy, throws a rock at Brent's whirligig because of the incessant noise it makes. His mother has a different perspective of it. How did Brent hope people might react to the whirligig?

18. Why was Brent able to confess to the painter in Weeksboro, Maine, that he was responsible for Lea's death and that he had been trying to end his own life?

19. How did the painter's statement change Brent's view of himself? "I could be wildly wrong. But my sense of you is that you're a good person, not a bad one."

20. Taking one's own life is called suicide.

It is a very serious matter and definitely frowned on by the majority of people in this society. Why is it an unacceptable behavior? Would Brent have solved any of his problems had he succeeded? Is suicide ever an answer to a person's problems? What happens to the people who are left behind?

21. Brent's life is changed with the completion of the fourth whirligig. Explain the change.

22. What have you learned about choices and the consequences of those choices?

How do you make choices? What guides you in making good choices?

23. Describe the development of the protagonist, Brent Bishop.

24. Discuss the effectiveness of the plot structure Fleischman has chosen.



Essay Topics

Why does Brent care that he is not dressed in the right costume for the party?

Describe Brent's parents and their relationship with each other.

Why doesn't Brent admit that he tried to kill himself?

Does Mrs. Zamora know how much she is giving Brent? Does she know how much he needs what she gives him? Does it matter?

Do you think Brent gets off too easy? Would something else have been better punishment? Would something else have been better justice?

Why does Fleischman alternate Brent's story with the stories of people touched by the whirligigs?

Describe how the whirligigs touch people's lives.

Would the end of the story be different if the artist had not been there? If so, what would change?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Fleischman uses many literary devices in *Whirligig*. Allusion is one that is very readily found. As you read the story, list each allusion you find, note the page number, indicate the source of the allusion (you may have to do some research to find the source for some), explain its meaning in *Whirligig*, categorize the sources, and then share your findings.

2. Create a chart demonstrating the cost of destruction from, and deaths caused from alcohol-related driving accidents.

Collect newspaper articles about alcohol-related accidents. Use them to create a collage to display with your chart.

3. Brent's blood alcohol level was .11. How is blood alcohol level determined? What does alcohol do to the body, nervous system, brain?

4. Interview someone in the juvenile justice system in your community—a juvenile judge, a social worker, or a police officer—and find out about probation.

Find answers to these questions and others you may think of. Why was Brent not tried in a courtroom with a jury? Why would a judge give him probation instead of a jail sentence for a wrongful death? Why did the judge allow Mrs. Zamora to decide Brent's fate? Did he go to detention? What do the laws in your state say about juvenile offenders? Either audio tape or video tape your interview to share with others.

5. In Washington state Brent saw Mt.

Olympus across the water and remembered the story of a Greek god. He compares his own atonement to that required of the god. Read the Greek myth he referred to. Create a Venn diagram or chart and compare his atonement with that of the god.

Whirligig 473 6. Create a chart or a Venn diagram and compare yourself to Brent.

7. Design a whirligig to honor someone who is special to you. Build it and share it with your classmates.

8. Use a map of the United States and find each of the four locations Brent chose for the whirligigs. Do some research about one of those places. Find some pictures of the place. What is the climate? What do people do for a living?

Perhaps you can find an Internet site about the location. Include information of interest to you and share it.

9. Mrs. Zamora provided the bus pass for Brent, but he would have had other expenses. Fleischman tells us the kinds of tools and materials he purchased to construct the whirligigs. He had to eat and Fleischman sometimes tells us what he ate. He had to



sleep and we know where he slept. Construct an itemized budget covering the forty-five days of Brent's journey. Where did he get the money? Where would you get the money?

10. We know Brent's basic route around the United States. Trace a likely route a Greyhound bus would take between the places where Brent constructed the whirligigs. Trace the route on a map of the United States. What major cities would he have traveled through? What might he have seen in those places if he had been on vacation instead of a mission?



Further Study

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The reviewer writes about the intricately structured novel and Fleischman's skill in connecting several people to the evolution of his main character.



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