

Willow Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Willow is the story of a high school teenager struggling to deal with the sudden death of her parents through the use of self-mutilation or physical pain she can control. Willow's life is isolated and reckless until she meets a sensitive, popular boy named Guy who shows Willow how to feel emotion, and teaches her how to love again.

At the opening of the novel, Willow Randall has just been transferred to a new high school after the sudden death of her parents. One rainy evening, Willow's parents had too much to drink at a party and asked Willow to drive them home even though she only had a learner's permit. Willow wrapped the car around a tree, instantly killing her parents. Now Willow is forced to live with the grief and guilt of losing her parents. From the opening of the novel, it is clear that Willow has not handled those emotions well. She sits in class obsessing over the scratch on a schoolmate's arm, wondering if the wound was self-inflicted, like all of Willow's wounds. As the day progresses, Willow mutilates herself in the bathroom and spends all of her free time obsessing over when she will be able to cut again. Willow has no friends at her new school and is terrified that people will find out that she's the girl who killed her parents.

Since her parent's death, Willow has been sent to live with her older brother, David, a university professor, and his new wife and child. Willow feels guilty not only for accidentally killing David's parents, but for messing up his picture perfect life. Although Willow had David had been close growing up, they find it impossible to talk about their emotions following their parents' death, leaving Willow further isolated. Cathy, David's wife, has gone out of her way to make Willow feel welcome in their home, but Willow resists all forms of affection, perhaps because she feels she is unworthy of it. Also fueling Willow's self-harm is the jealousy she feels toward her infant niece, Isabelle. Whenever Willow sees David kiss or cuddle his daughter, Willow is overwhelmed with emotion, knowing that she will never be anyone's daughter again, and that no one will love her as unconditionally as a parent would. All this changes, however, when Willow meets Guy, a sensitive and handsome schoolmate who stops into Willow's job at the university library for help with his research. Guy is interested in all the same books as Willow and the two bond over their love of *Tristes Tropiques*, the book that had once been Willow's father's favorite. Although Willow is drawn to Guy, she fears getting too close to him because she doesn't want him to know her deep secret: that she's covered in scars. Guy does find out, however and is horrified. He threatens to tell David the truth about Willow's body, but in the end, decides that he will make it his personal project to save Willow's life.

Guy and Willow begin spending almost all of their spare time together and Guy monitors Willow's behaviors. He tries to understand what fuels Willow's desperate need to cut into her skin and he realizes alongside the reader that Willow is harboring so much emotional pain and the only way she can release it is through physical pain, a pain that she can control. The only way for Willow to stop cutting herself is for her to learn how to process her emotional pain with a healthy outlet: through talking. As the novel progresses, Willow slowly learns how to trust again. She makes a few friends and



even loses her virginity to Guy, a symbol of how far she's come in repairing her broken heart. At the end of the novel, however, the turning point is when Willow is finally able to speak with David about their great loss, thus repairing their much damaged relationship. In the final scene of the novel, Willow tosses her razorblades into the river as a symbol of her new life without self-mutilation.



Chapters 1 - 4

Chapters 1 - 4 Summary

The novel opens with Willow sitting in her high school classroom, staring at the arms of one of her fellow classmates. There's a long, red scratch on the girl's arm and Willow is trying to figure out how she got it. Maybe she has a kitten that scratched her, or maybe she got it some other way, the way Willow receives her marks. Willow knows that all around her, the kids at school whisper, gossip about her behind her back: she's the one who killed her parents. Overwhelmed with emotion, Willow runs from the classroom and into the bathroom, pulling a fresh razorblade from her backpack. The voices of the whispering girls ring in her ears as she presses the razorblade against her skin. As the blood pricks forward, Willow thinks it's the most beautiful feeling in the world.

Willow is a high school junior whose parents are dead. She lives with her older brother, David, a college professor. Because David works at the college, he was able to secure a job in the university library for Willow, even though these jobs are typically reserved for college students. Willow works alongside Miss Hamilton, a feisty old woman who always seems to be critiquing Willow's work ethic. One day, a young man asks Willow for help locating a book in the stacks. Although Willow hates to be alone with people, particularly people of her own age, Miss Hamilton is watching her and she knows she'll be in trouble if she doesn't help him. In the elevator, the young man introduces himself as Guy, and says that he recognizes Willow from somewhere. They discover that Guy once took a class with David at the university. As they exit the elevator, Guy reaches out and touches her shoulder to prevent her from accidentally running into a bookshelf. Willow is flustered; she hates to be touched. She finds his book and is nearly paralyzed when she reads the title, *Tristes Tropiques*, her father's favorite book. Although she's clearly uncomfortable, Willow is so shocked she sits down next to Guy. They spend the next few minutes discussing the emotional importance of the book in both their lives. As they talk, Guy figures out that he doesn't know Willow through David, but that he recognizes her from school, which paralyzes Willow with fear: why is he talking to her? What does he know? Her desire to cut is so strong she rushes from the stacks, leaving a bewildered Guy behind. When Guy chases her down the street, Willow turns around and snaps that her parents are dead, and that she's the one who killed them.

Since her parents died, Willow has been living with her brother David, his wife Cathy, and their sixteen-month-old daughter Isabelle. Cathy's gone out of her way to make Willow feel welcome, even buying watercolor paints in case Willow feels the need to be artistic, but Willow doesn't take joy in anything anymore. She misses her old home nearly as much as she misses her parents. Everything around her reminds her of them: a lullaby Cathy sings to the baby, the books on the bookshelf. Anything can set Willow off. She takes care to ensure that her scars and cuts would never be noticeable to her family, but they're getting harder to hide and the fear of being discovered is constant. Willow knows that her brother would be devastated if he found out what she was doing to herself, and she desperately wants to keep the secret from him. Whenever her



brother asks her questions about her day at the dinner table, Willow immediately changes the conversation. Today, she quickly tells her brother that she met one of his old students, Guy, and that he had nothing but complimentary things to say about David as a teacher. David misconstrues the entire conversation, thinking that Willow and Guy might be dating. Willow thinks for one fleeting moment that her brother is actually happy. Her relationship with him has been particularly strained since their parents died - he's never confronted her about accidentally killing them - and she thinks, ever so briefly, that their relationship is normal again. Later that night, however, when Willow creeps out of bed, she sees her brother weeping with abandon. She knows that she is the one who put him in this position, and she is devastated. She pulls the razorblade from her pocket and cuts into her arm then and there, barely bothering to hide in the shadows.

The next morning, Willow avoids her brother completely. She waits outside the school, reading a book, when she is approached by a group of girls from her class, one of whom is the girl with scratches on her arm. They invite Willow over to sit with them, and she awkwardly agrees. She normally tries to avoid social situations, but she feels that she and the girl with the bloody arm might be kindred spirits, that they might both be cutters. Willow bumbles through a terribly awkward conversation in which she tries to ask the girl if she's a cutter, but changes the sentence half-way through to "cat lover" and asks if the girl has a kitten, a kitten that might have scratched her. The girls all look at Willow as if she's from Mars, her conversational skills are completely out of context and bizarre. Willow runs away from the group of girls, desperate to find a place where she can punish herself for being so stupid, but the school seems terribly busy today and she can't find a place private enough to cut herself. As she runs through the halls, her science teacher grabs her arm to stop her. He can tell something is wrong, and asks Willow to help him set up for the physics lab, perhaps to keep Willow's mind off whatever is bothering her. There's already a girl in the classroom, Vicki, who is doing extra credit work to pass physics. She makes polite conversation with Willow, inviting her to help with the experiment. Willow can't resist the girl's friendly nature until the girl casually says, "You're an orphan, aren't you?" Willow is dumbstruck. She can't believe the girl would say something like that so flippantly.

Chapters 1 - 4 Analysis

This opening section of the novel functions simply to set up Willow's character, her emotional state, and her way of life after the death of her parents. Although the reader doesn't yet know the details of Willow's parents' death, it is clear that she accidentally killed them. One rainy night, when her parents had too much to drink, they asked Willow to drive them home. She lost control of the car and both her parents died. Now, she lives with the crippling grief and guilt - not only that her parents are dead, but that she killed them. What is interesting about Willow's situation is that she lives with her elder brother, a college professor, who seems to be in complete denial about how this loss is affecting his seventeen-year-old sister. He refuses to talk about their parents with her, and adamantly refuses to talk with her about how they died. As a result of their inability to express their emotions, either positively or negatively, both David and Willow suffer from depression, and a feeling of being alone with their grief. David makes a concerted



effort to appear put together. He doesn't want anyone to know that he is struggling - he prides himself on being the head of the family, the emotional rock - but late at night, he creeps out of bed and cries in the darkened kitchen thinking no one can find him there. Willow, on the other hand, bottles up all her emotions, feeling like no one would understand her anyway, and when the grief is too much to bear, cuts into her body. Willow physically marks her skin with the wounds she feels in the inside. Many cutters, like Willow, seek to control physical pain when they cannot control emotional pain. Although it has not been stated explicitly, it appears that this is how Willow feels.

Cutting is the only form of therapy Willow receives since her parents' death. She has cut herself off completely from her friends and family, so, as bizarre as it sounds, her razor blade is her best friend, the only thing that understands what she is feeling. Willow has formed a strange and dangerous relationship with her pain because she feels abandoned by everything and everyone else. Much of this abandonment stems from Willow's belief that everyone around her blames her for her parents' death. Even though she has changed schools, she knows that it is only a matter of time before people discover what she has done. She avoids being found out by avoiding social situations altogether. Still, her paranoia follows her everywhere. Every time she hears girls giggling or whispering, she is sure it is at her expense. It is obvious, thought, that Willow is desperate for a connection. She misses her brother terribly, even though she lives with him, because she feels responsible for the way his life has changed since the accident as well: "Seeing her brother should be the lone bright spot in the otherwise bleak landscape that is her life, and yet it simply isn't so. Because somehow, that rainy night last March didn't just end her parents' lives. Somehow - as surely as if he had been in the car with them - she lost her brother that night too" (Page 28). Because Willow feels utterly alone in the world, she has strange emotional reactions to everyday things. When she sees her brother kissing his infant daughter, for example, Willow is overwhelmed with jealousy. No one is close enough to her that they would want to touch her, let alone kiss her. It is clear, even this early on, that Guy will be the person who connects with Willow.



Chapters 5 & 6

Chapters 5 & 6 Summary

Willow sits outside the University, trying to study. There's a girl talking on her phone nearby, which is a huge distraction. As she listens to the girl talk, Willow feels overwhelmed missing her own friends, the friends she has no relationship with anymore. Lost in thought, Willow is interrupted by Guy, who sits down casually next to her, picks up her book, and rifles through it, teasing her, as if they are old friends. Guy's nonchalant attitude jars Willow from her reverie. All she wants to do is get away from Guy, to keep him at a distance, to cut. Guy doesn't understand why Willow is acting so cold to him, and when she tries to run away, he grabs her arm hoping to talk to her. His grip accidentally rips open the many cuts on her wrist and she begins to bleed. Guy is shocked, horrified, and completely confused. He doesn't understand how his grip could have caused so much damage. As Willow rushes away, her backpack falls open and all her belongings tumble out, including her razor blades. When Guy sees this, he immediately understands what is going on. The look on his face is exactly what Willow had feared: revulsion. Guy's look of horror changes to one of determination, and he takes off sprinting across the university fields. Willow doesn't have to guess what he's doing. He's headed toward David's office, to tell him her dirty secret. Willow chases after Guy, begging him to stop. They reach the office at the same time, and Willow pleads with Guy not to tell David, saying that this news would kill her brother. When David opens his office door, he's utterly confused as to why Guy is standing there, holding hands with Willow. Again, he assumes that the two teenagers are dating. Guy makes up a lame excuse, saying that he was only here to ask about the upcoming syllabus. Relief floods over Willow. When David leaves for a meeting, Guy is visibly upset. He shouts at Willow, saying that he doesn't have time to deal with this. He had a great year planned, and now he's stuck with her. Willow doesn't understand. She didn't ask anything from Guy, but now that he's seen her wounds, he feels responsible to protect. Willow isn't sure how to react: should she be flattered? Embarrassed? Guy reaches into his bag and pulls out a first-aid kit. As Willow stares at the ground, Guy gently holds her arm in his hand and cleans out the wounds, telling her she should be careful. Cuts like this can easily get infected. As he cleans her, Willow thinks how beautiful Guy's hands are.

The next morning over breakfast, David tries to casually ask Willow about her relationship with Guy. Willow brushes off his questions, telling him the truth: they've only met a few times. He's a nice guy, but she's not interested in a relationship. David grins and nods, as if he understands something Willow doesn't. At school later that day, Willow thinks about how she must look like a model student, always taking notes, always appearing interested in what the teacher has to say. In reality, however, she's constantly thinking about making the next cut, and how she can keep this reality a secret from the real world. She's horrified every time she thinks about how someone else knows: Guy knows her darkest secret. Letting him see her arms outside the university was more embarrassing than if he had seen her completely naked. After school, Guy is waiting for Willow, with Laurie, one of the girls Willow had awkwardly



tried to have a conversation with a few days earlier. Jealousy flares in Willow, but she doesn't understand what she's jealous about: Is Laurie Guy's girlfriend? Why does she care? They walk together for awhile before Laurie leaves to meet up with her real boyfriend, Adrian. A sigh of relief escapes from Willow's lips. She and Guy walk silently toward the library together, so Willow won't be late for work. He follows her inside, and tells her he has a list of books he needs help finding in the stacks. Willow is annoyed that he has followed her, and practically throws the books at him as she pulls them off the shelves. She stops when she reaches the last book on the list. With a white-knuckled grip, Willow hurls the book at him and collapses on the ground. The book was her father's book. The last book he wrote before he died. Immediately, Willow thinks that Guy is here to torment her, but the look on his face shows her that the effect hadn't been intentional. He forgot the book was on his list. He gently sits next to Willow on the floor and tries to apologize. All that Willow wants to do is run away and to cut deeper than she's ever cut before, but Guy keeps talking. He tells Willow about the lecture he heard her father give about his trip to Guatemala, and how impacted he was by her father's word. Willow listens, wiping away tears, feeling the urge to cut slowly leave her body, like a held breath. Before he leaves, Guy gives Willow his phone number, asking her to call him before she cuts herself again. At least then she won't be alone. At least then he'll know that she hasn't bled to death. That night, Willow wakes from a nightmare, the nightmare she has almost every night: crashing metal, broken glass grazing across her skin, her parents' screams. She reaches for her razorblade and her fingers fumble across Guy's phone number. She knows she won't call him, she'd never do that, but she holds the number tightly in her fist and listens to the beating of her heart.

Chapters 5 & 6 Analysis

In this section, the reader sees first-hand just how lonely Willow is. She misses her friends desperately, but doesn't know how to reach out to them. Willow's greatest fear, and what she's convinced herself is truth, is that everyone blames her for her parents' death, and that she will never amount to anything more in her life than a murderer. This emotional certainty is what prevents Willow from reaching out to her brother, and what prevents her from reaching out to her friends. Willow is a self-punisher. Although it hasn't been stated explicitly, Willow likely believes that she should have died in the crash along with her parents, that she doesn't deserve to live. This guilt drives Willow to refuse herself any joys in life, including having friends and being romantically interested in a boy.

This section also highlights the turning point in Willow's relationship with Guy. Before today, Guy was just a cute male friend whom Willow sometimes spent time with. She was determined to hold Guy at arm's length, never to let him get close enough to see what's going on inside her. Guy accidentally becomes privy to Willow's dark secret when her backpack tumbles open and he finds her razor blades. Guy's reaction causes Willow to have many different reactions. First, her immediate fear, that she is a disgusting human being undeserving of love and understanding, is realized when she interprets Guy's expression as revulsion, which she takes to mean that he is reviled by her, not



her actions. There is a big distinction in these two interpretations that are very important to understanding Willow's emotional state in the novel. Willow's two main actions in the novel thus far have been accidentally killing her parents and purposefully harming herself. These actions are both extreme and warrant extreme reactions from those around her. The flaw in Willow's character is that she takes every reaction personally. So while members of her family are saddened by the loss of Willow's parents, Willow interprets that sadness as sadness for what she's done to them. When David is devastated that his parents are dead, Willow interprets that as a devastation that she lived. When Guy is mortified by Willow's violent act of cutting herself, Willow interprets that as mortification for how gruesome she is. Willow's tendency to self-inflict the criticism directly fuels her desire to self-inflict pain; a physical pain that she can control.

However, Guy's reaction to Willow's secret is not revulsion at all; it is fear. Fear that Willow is going to accidentally kill herself. When he tries to tell David the truth, however, he realizes that he cannot be responsible for ruining David's life. He decides to make it his personal mission to save Willow, to stop her destructive behavior. From this moment on, Guy will no longer be seen just as a friend to Willow, but something far more intimate: a secret keeper.



Chapters 7 & 8

Chapters 7 & 8 Summary

Willow is at the art supply store buying boxes of fresh razor blades. As she leaves the store, whistling to herself, she bumps into her brother drinking coffee at a nearby café. Immediately, Willow realizes that her brother is in town for parent-teacher conferences at her school and is overwhelmed with guilt. David shouldn't be going to these meetings for at least 15 years, with Isabelle's teachers. Still, she tries to be nonchalant, even sitting with David for a cup of coffee. David lies to Willow, saying that he's in town just to get some fresh air between classes. His answers outrage Willow, who desperately wants her brother to just be honest with her! For a moment, the tension between the siblings is lifted when they discuss what books they are each reading. When Willow mentions that she has been reading *Tristes Tropiques*, David's mood changes: shouldn't she be working on her schoolwork? How does she have time to balance assigned and extracurricular reading? Willow is devastated. It's as if their five minutes of pleasantries never happened. She reaches into her backpack and hands over her paycheck from the library, to help with household expenses. David reluctantly takes the money, and then remarks on the cut on Willow's arm. She is shocked that he's noticed, and ironically states that she cut herself. Willow begins looking around desperately for an excuse to leave the conversation and is both shocked and pleased to see Guy walking down the street with Laurie and Adrian. She bolts from the table and jogs to catch up with them. Willow wouldn't normally run into a social situation, but she's desperate. The group receives Willow comfortably, and she joins them as they eat ice cream in the park and choose a movie to watch that evening. As Adrian searches for a pen to write down possible movie times, he quickly reaches into Willow's backpack, accidentally dumping out the boxes of razor blades she's just purchased. Willow is horrified. Guy leaps to Willow's defense, thanking her for picking up the boxes he asked her for. Everyone is confused as to why Guy would need four boxes of razor blades, but no one questions him further. When the rest of the group leaves for the movie, Guy stays behind with Willow. The two make pleasant conversation, remarking on how similar their interests are. When Guy starts to ask Willow about the phone call last night, she begs him to change the conversation, so he tells her about his childhood growing up in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore.

The next morning, Willow wakes and wades through an awkward breakfast with her family. She feels very out of place with them, as if her very presence is an inconvenience to them. She wants to repay David and Cathy for their hospitality and desperately wants her brother to be happy, even if it's just for a moment. When David talks about the project he's working on, and the one book he can't find to complete the project, Willow has a great idea: she'll find the book for David. At school, Willow learns that she failed her French quiz and that she'll need to have a parent signature acknowledging the quiz before she can continue in the class. Both Willow and the teacher, who realizes the impact of her words, are deeply embarrassed by the conversation. Willow cuts the rest of the day's classes and races toward the bookshop,



her father's favorite bookshop, the bookshop she's sure David was too emotional to enter in search of the book. On the way, she bumps into Laurie and Chloe who have also cut class to go shopping. Willow considers how truly nice these girls are, even if they're completely clueless about what Willow is going through. At the bookshop, Willow is disappointed to find that she cannot locate the book David is searching for. She feels overwhelmed with stupidity: if David couldn't find the book, what made her think she would be able to? Willow didn't realize how much she had been counting on finding the book, on bringing David a moment of happiness, until she finds herself curled up in the corner of the anthropology section, razorblade in hand, praying for enough privacy to cut. When it becomes clear that there are too many people around, Willow gets up to leave, but her eye catches sight of *The Tempest*, her favorite Shakespeare play. She decides to buy it as a gift for Guy. Later that day, Willow meets up with Guy to give him the book. She's sure he'll think it's stupid, or that she has no right to buy him gifts, but he's pleased. He loves Shakespeare but has never gotten around to reading this book.

Chapters 7 & 8 Analysis

Willow's relationship with David is explored in further detail in this section. As discussed in previous sections, Willow feels completely responsible for ruining David's life. She truly believes that he is only housing her because he worries that she has nowhere else to go. He doesn't want her there, and every time he sees her, he is reminded of how she ruined his life. This guilt is overwhelming, and Willow is desperate to bring David even a moment of happiness. What started out as jealousy over David's relationship with his infant daughter Isabelle is slowly morphing into an all-consuming sense of guilt. Anything can set Willow off. When a letter arrived in the mail regarding her parent-teacher conferences, David did not tell Willow about it. Willow is sure that this means David is angry with her, that he resents her and the responsibility he has in her life. In reality, David likely didn't tell her about the parent-teacher conferences so as not to upset her further. She has no parents to attend the conferences, after all, and David likely doesn't want to keep reminding Willow about this. It's clear through their few interactions that David is worried about Willow's depression. Willow's relationship with Guy, for example, gives David hope that Willow is getting better. When he thinks about this, he actually becomes gleeful, smiling and laughing with his family. Willow doesn't see things this way, however, and is sure that David thinks she is unworthy of being loved because she herself thinks she is unworthy of being loved. It is a vicious cycle of projection. Willow despises herself, and she projects this hatred onto other people, sure they see her the same way. Then she takes other people's hatred for her and uses it as a reason to justify her own self-hatred. It is no wonder that she feels completely alone, confused, and terrified.

One way that Willow hopes to reconnect with her brother is through books. This is emotionally difficult for Willow, who relates books back to her dead father, but she knows this is the best way to reach the old David, the way she used to reach him before their parents died. Willow's plan to find David's missing book for him shows how naïve she is. She believes that while David, a university professor with connections to bookstores and libraries across the country, couldn't find the book, she will be able to.



Of course this plan does not work out as Willow had planned, and she completely berates herself, calling herself stupid for thinking she could do something David couldn't. It is interesting to note that when Willow is about to cut herself in the bookstore, the book her eyes fall on is *The Tempest*, which she ends up purchasing for Guy. This is interesting to note because in *The Tempest*, the character Prospero's books are a symbol of his power. The same could be said about Willow, David, and their parents: Books equal information, which equals power. Books are also the way that Willow and Guy relate to each other, strengthening their relationship. The reader can expect this theme to carry through the rest of the novel. One interesting thing to note is that when Willow is in public and can't cut, she often mangles something else around her, like papers or flowers. Willow often doesn't even realize that she's tearing things apart, which shows her emotional state during her dark periods.



Chapters 9 - 11

Chapters 9 - 11 Summary

Willow leaves the library after work and immediately sees David walking toward her on the street. Immediately, Willow is uncomfortable because she's been thinking about how she can forge David's signature on the failed French quiz so he won't have to know she's struggling in school. She fears that David can see the guilt washed on her face, and that he'll figure out that she's hiding something. David greets Willow kindly as he approaches her, but the two don't have a chance to talk before they are interrupted by one of Stephen's acquaintances from the University. This man, Stephen, hasn't been David in almost a year and he's eager to catch up. Willow stands there awkwardly, knowing that when David recounts the events of the past year, he's going to incriminate her. He's going to tell Stephen that she killed their parents. A part of Willow is exhilarated. There's no way David can sidestep this question and it will bring the emotional reckoning that she's been craving. Finally, David will have to confront her, tell her how he really feels. But David doesn't tell Stephen about his parents. When Stephen asks how his parents are doing, David simply says that his father always thought very fondly of Stephen, and he leaves it at that. Willow is stunned. For the first time since the accident, she is angry with her brother. Something snaps inside her and she no longer wants to protect David or make life easier for him. She wants to scream out that her parents are dead and that it's all her fault. She wants David to admit it, to Stephen and to himself. She pulls the French quiz out of her bag and shoves it in David's face, completely interrupting his conversation with Stephen. She shouts that she needs a parent or legal guardian's signature. Both men look at her like she's crazy, but she doesn't care. David awkwardly leaves the conversation and walks home in silence with Willow. At home, David and Willow get into a terrible fight. At dinner, Willow realizes how strange it is that David and Cathy have never asked her to babysit Isabelle. She is seventeen and living in their home. Wouldn't it be natural? Then Willow realizes that the reason they've never asked her is because they don't trust her. She killed David's parents, and now he probably wants to make sure that she doesn't kill off the rest of his family. When David tries to deny that this is the way he feels, Willow nearly explodes with anger, screaming that he's in denial about everything! She screams for David to just admit that he hates her, but he won't. Emotion boils inside Willow and she races upstairs, locking the door behind her, searching desperately for her razors. She accidentally knocks her phone off the table in the process and blindly dials Guy's phone number. Even when Guy answers, the emotion is still so strong Willow cannot resist her urges, and she cuts herself while she sobs into the phone, hiding nothing from Guy.

The next morning, Willow wakes to find her room in complete disarray. The house is empty, and Cathy has left a note apologizing for last night's fight, giving Willow permission to stay home from school that day to recover. She walks through the house in a daze, barely comprehending all the work she needs to get done. She feels like she's hasn't slept in days. When she looks out the window to check the weather, she is surprised to see Guy waiting outside the house for her. Without stopping to analyze the



situation, Willow opens the door and lets him in. Guy immediately looks at Willow's arms and breathes a sigh of relief. Because Willow cut herself on her stomach the night before, he thinks he imagined what she was doing last night during the phone call. Willow is still overwhelmed with anger, and now the anger lashes out on Guy. Willow angrily lifts her shirt to show him where she cut herself the night before: "Here, you don't believe me, you want to see...take a look if you don't believe me!" (p. 191). Guy is grief stricken. He wants to know what happened, but Willow refuses to give him a straight answer. She has a sarcastic, snotty response to each of his questions. Finally, Guy's patience runs out and he tries to leave. Willow suddenly realizes that Guy is the only person who is trying to understand what she is going through, and she begs him to stay. Guy stays, and decides to cut school for the day along with her. They walk to the park, and Willow talks openly with Guy about her emotions after her parents' death, her fight with her brother, and how much she misses her old friends. The two later find themselves up in the stacks at the library, where their conversation turns dark. Willow tells him about the first time she ever cut herself, after her parents' death, and how it felt, both physically and emotionally. It becomes immediately clear that Willow is at her emotional breaking point. Reliving this moment makes her behaviors erratic and dangerous. First, Willow climbs onto Guy's lap and tries to kiss him, desperate to feel anything but the emotional pain of reliving her parents' death. Kissing Guy is such a wonderful sensation and Willow hates herself, absolutely loathes herself, for seeking it out. She has convinced herself for so long that she doesn't deserve happiness. Guy's touch evokes something deep inside her and her hate boils out. She pushes Guy away from her and reaches for her razorblade. Even though Guy shouts and tries to stop her, she cuts her arms in front of him, desperate for release.

Chapters 9 - 11 Analysis

Everything reaches boiling point between Willow and David in this section. Willow is finally able to pinpoint why her relationship with David is so strained, and for the first time since their parents' death, she is able to vocalize this with him. First, Willow is angry that David lives in a state of denial about their parents. He avoids telling Stephen the truth about his parents when Willow hopes he will finally implicate her as their murderer. Again, Willow's reaction to David shows her naivety. She assumes that David is in denial about the accident. Willow refuses to believe that David might have avoided telling Stephen about his parents because it wasn't a socially appropriate conversation topic. Willow has a strong view about the way people feel about her. In every interaction she searches for evidence to support her theories, blinded to the fact that her theories might only exist in her imagination. Willow is desperate for communication, for open discourse with her brother, but she cannot comprehend that what David truly feels might not match what she fears he feels. It seems that until David calls Willow a murderer, she will not be satisfied. As previously discussed, Willow projects her self-emotion onto others: If Willow thinks she is a murderer, everyone else must think she is a murderer, and she won't be satisfied until they admit it. In a way, Willow is desperate for her brother to blame her so she can justify the way she is punishing herself.



Guy's role in the novel is important because he has managed to get close enough to Willow to show her another perspective. For example, Guy is able to say that David likely doesn't want Willow to babysit so that she doesn't feel overwhelmed. If David were to say this, Willow would not believe him, but because Guy is emotionally removed from the root family problem, the accident, Willow is able to listen to him with a different clarity. Willow's sense of self worth is not tied into how Guy feels about her in the same way it is tied into how David feels about her. This distance allows Guy to be the voice of reason that slowly heals Willow's emotional scars. It is interesting to note Willow's candor with Guy. Because she knows Guy has already seen the worst of her - her cuts - she knows that nothing she says would be as ugly as what he's already seen. Willow's cuts are the most private part of herself, so it should be no surprise that she has no problem lifting her shirt and exposing her breasts to Guy (which she blatantly does when exposing the cuts on her stomach), while the thought of exposing herself to anyone else, even girls her own age, would mortify her. In a return to the motif of *The Tempest*, Willow compares Guy to Ferdinand, the romantic lead, reminding the reader that she is opening herself up to Guy both physically and emotionally.

In this section, Willow opens up about the first time she cut herself. After her parents' death, David wanted to move their books into his house and he asked Willow to help dismantle the bookshelves. Holding a screwdriver in her hand, the emotional weight of what was happening finally hit her, and she began stabbing herself with the screwdriver: "This pain, this physical pain, was flowing through my veins like heroin, and I was numb, immune to the rest of it, I couldn't feel anything but the pain, and I knew that I had found a way to save myself" (Page 222). Since the day her parents died, Willow has taught herself that she is unworthy to feel anything other than pain. Pain is what keeps her alive. In her mind, it is what prevents her from actually dying. Pain is the one thing she is still in control of in her life. Willow's act of cutting herself in front of Guy is shocking, but not unexpected. The novel has been building up to this moment through Willow's escalating actions of exposure. First she showed Guy her cuts, then she let him listen to her while she was cutting, and now she allows him to watch her while she cuts herself. In a way, these actions are far more intimate than if Willow were to expose herself sexually. She is exposing the darkness, the ugliness everyone tries to hide from the outside world. This interaction in the library is clearly the climax of the novel, and the turning point in the relationship between Guy and Willow. Guy has seen the very pit of Willow's emotional darkness. He has seen her at the very bottom. Now the only place Guy can take Willow is back up again.



Chapters 12 & 13

Chapters 12 & 13 Summary

The next day in school, Willow can barely contain her emotions. She spends the day obsessing about what happened in the stacks of the library. She knows that things are going to be awkward the next time she sees David, but nowhere near as awkward as things will be the next time she sees Guy. In the hallway, Willow is approached by Chloe and Laurie who invite her to the park with them. Willow doesn't have the energy to say no, so she blindly follows them. She should have known that they would be meeting up with the guys, including Guy, but she is still surprised to see him. He smiles when he sees her, not the same passionate way he smiled at her in the stacks, but at least it's friendly. Guy is so nice to Willow that she feels as if she might explode, as if she's not worthy of his kindness, so she fakes a migraine and quickly runs home, away from her friends. When she runs in the door, Cathy immediately asks if it would be okay to leave Isabelle with her for a few moments while she runs to the pharmacy. Willow is dumbstruck. Of course that would be okay. With Cathy out the door, Willow tries to act like an ideal babysitter, changing Isabelle's diaper and making her a healthy snack, but nothing goes as planned. She accidentally pricks Isabelle with a pin while changing her cloth diaper, and burns the eggs, setting off the smoke alarm. Everything is in chaos when the doorbell rings: it's Guy coming to check if Willow is feeling alright. She drags him inside to help her fan the smoke out of the kitchen. Moments later, David arrives, completely confused as to what's going on. His first instinct is to rush toward Isabelle, to kiss her on the top of the head and make sure that everything's alright. The sight of this causes Willow to double over clutching her stomach, almost in pain. She decides that she cannot cope with this and that she needs a nap. Guy lays down on Willow's bed and calls her to him. She lays down with him and once his arms are around her, she almost immediately falls asleep.

The next morning, after Guy has left, Willow is awoken by a soft crying and she knows immediately that the sound is coming from David. Willow slowly creeps down the stairs, razorblade in hand, ready to punish herself for hurting David, just as she did last time she saw him cry. Only this time, she second-guesses herself, wondering if taking the pain is too easy an out. This time, she forces herself to watch him cry until his last tear is shed, and she doesn't allow herself the comfort of the razor. After witnessing David cry, Willow is unable to fall asleep and thus finds herself struggling to stay awake in class. When she walks to the library for work, Guy is once again there to greet her, holding a cup of iced coffee. After work, Guy takes Willow for a walk through the park, and then they meet up with the rest of their friends for dinner. At the restaurant, the table of teens see another teenage girl who is nearly skeletal, obviously battling a terrible eating disorder. Andy, Chloe's boyfriend, starts making remarks about how stupid this girl must be: "Look, I know the type ..society, the media, everybody else is responsible for her problems. It's like it's become this hip thing to starve yourself and complain that the rest of the world is driving you to do it" (p. 267). Willow can't listen to him. Everything he says about this girl would also pertain to her. She leaves the restaurant overwhelmed



with anger, and asks Guy if he will do a favor for her: take her home. At first, Guy thinks she is asking him to take her back to his house, but she means that she wants to go home to her real home: her parents' home.

Chapters 12 & 13 Analysis

One of Willow's main complaints about her relationship with her brother is that he does not trust her, perhaps because Willow does not trust herself. She resents the fact that David has never asked her to babysit, even though Willow herself questions whether or not she can handle the responsibility. The time finally comes for Cathy to leave Isabelle alone with Willow, and all of Willow's worst fears are realized. What is most interesting about the babysitting experience is that when Willow accidentally pricks Isabelle with the diaper pin, she is momentarily transfixed by the tiny pearl of blood beading up against her infant niece's skin. She feels terrible for inflicting such a minor injury on the baby, marring her perfect skin, but she does not feel this same sense of guilt about her own skin. She ponders how she would feel if she knew Isabelle had intentionally cut herself, and she knows she would be mortified. The ability to think about such actions objectively shows that Willow is emotionally maturing. She is beginning to see her obsession, her cutting, in the same way outsiders might see it, as a bloody, ugly, and violent way of dealing with emotion. Once Willow is able to see her cutting for what it truly is, she will hopefully be able to stop it.

Willow is also able to see her disease in another light when she witnesses the anorexic girl at the restaurant. Willow's reaction to the girl's emaciated frame is strong. She knows how emotionally damaged this girl must be, and that the two of them are very similar. Because Willow draws such a strong connection between herself and the anorexic girl, she is unable to cope with Andy's reaction: "Look, I know the type ... society, the media, everybody else is responsible for her problems. It's like it's become this hip thing to starve yourself and complain that the rest of the world is driving you to do it" (p. 267). When Guy sees how much of an impact the girl has had on Willow, he tells her that, "The way [the anorexic girl's] body affected you, that's the way your scars affect me" (p. 269). Since Willow is able to see the negative way such abuse affects another woman's body, she will be more likely to recognize the ways she is abusing herself.



Chapters 14 - 16

Chapters 14 - 16 Summary

On the day Guy picks Willow up to drive her home, it is pouring rain. They drive in silence toward Willow's old house until Willow suddenly shouts for Guy to stop the car. She runs through the driving rain toward a tree, covered in paint, with its bark stripped away. It is obviously the site of Willow's accident, the accident that killed her parents. Without explaining, Willow gets back in the car and asks Guy to drive on. When they reach Willow's house, she finds that she is unable to go inside. The couple goes out for lunch instead, where Willow runs into her old best friend, Markie. Although almost a year has passed between the old friends, they catch up as if no time has passed. Markie explains that her feelings have been hurt since Willow refused to answer any of her phone calls. Willow explains that she has had trouble connecting with anyone since the accident, knowing that no one understands what she is feeling. Willow promises that once she's feeling better, she'll call Markie. Then she and Guy drive back to Willow's parents' house. Seeing Markie has changed something in Willow, and she is now able to enter the house. She walks around slowly, trying to take everything in. She stops dead in her tracks when she sees the screwdriver, her first instrument of self-harm, lying on the floor. Upstairs, she rifles through her parents' paperwork and finds a note from her mother, reminding herself to pick up calcium-enriched orange juice for Willow. The sight of this note, and her mother's obvious care for her, brings Willow to tears. She sobs until she can barely breathe, begging for Guy to take care of her, knowing that no one will ever take care of her the same way again. But Guy is there for Willow, as best as he can be, supporting her through this emotional journey. At the end of chapter fourteen, Willow and Guy have sex for the first time, cementing their relationship.

In the days that follow, Willow finds herself unable to complete her schoolwork, including the analytic paper she has been working on throughout the novel. She obsesses over the note in her mother's handwriting that she found in the house, and also on her emotional outpouring before sleeping with Guy. While she is in her bedroom, Willow once again hears her brother weeping in the next room. As usual, she crouches on the stairs, listening, razorblade firmly in hand. The edge of the razor begins to slice into her fist and she thinks for the first time that this is not what she wants. Instead, she rushes to her brother's side and surprisingly, he welcomes her, crying out, "Oh, Willow, what if you had died that night too?" (p. 307). The two stay up all night and talk about their feelings. David explains that the reason why he never talks about their parents with Willow is because he doesn't want to make her relive that horrible night, and he doesn't ever want to make her feel guilty about what happened. David weeps at night because he feels unequipped to handle the changes in their lives, and fears that Willow resents him for his new role as her guardian: "I have always been responsible for you. Just by virtue of loving you, I've had a responsibility to you and for you. You have that responsibility to me too, and to anyone that will ever love. But it's different not" (p. 317). Because she and her brother are speaking more openly than they have in years, Willow is desperate to show him her scars, to prove to him that she is struggling with their



parents' deaths as much as he is, but in the end, she still fears what this revelation will do to her brother. Instead, David agrees to help Willow complete her paper, and stays up all night helping her complete her work. The next day at school, Willow sits happily at the bridge, surrounded by her friends and her boyfriend. She and Guy sit on the edge of the bridge with their feet dangling into the water. Guy picks up Willow's box of razorblades and urges her to throw it in the river. After a moment of contemplation, Willow lets the box fall from her hands, and she feels as if this is her new beginning.

Chapters 14 - 16 Analysis

Willow's decision to revisit her childhood home shows the reader that she is finally ready to confront the demon inside her, the demon that has been haunting her throughout the novel, forcing her to self-harm in order to cope with her emotions. Willow has been taking small steps toward her recovery all along, but returning to the scene of the accident will certainly have a profound effect on the way she processes her emotions. The fact that it is raining on the day of the drive makes Willow relive the accident as if it is happening in real time, and hopefully for her, this visit will produce a new, healthier emotion in her. Willow's moment of reverence at the tree where her parents died is a moving moment in which Willow is finally able to say goodbye and hopefully move on with her life. Although Willow is able to say goodbye to her parents, she still struggles to enter her childhood home and be surrounded with its sights and smells. Instead, she and Guy go out for lunch.

At the restaurant, Willow is reunited with her old best friend, Markie. Interestingly, although Willow has feared that she and Markie would no longer have anything to talk about, they slip easily into girl talk conversation that is reminiscent of the phone conversation Willow overheard in chapter five. In chapter five, Willow thought that the girl's conversation topics, which ranged from boys to split end, were the furthest topics from her mind. Willow pitied herself for being unable to discuss such trivial matters with her friends because she was unable to think about anything but the accident. When she speaks with Markie, however, they talk about the exact same topics, boys and split ends. Although these topics are somewhat cliché for teenage girls, and certainly superficial, they show how much Willow has changed since meeting Guy. She is able to have a teenage conversation and enjoy her friend in a way she hasn't been able to since her parents' death. Willow is also able to understand the ways her behavior has affected those around her. This is a huge milestone in Willow's recovery process. Later in the novel, Willow is also able to listen to the way the accident has affected her brother, a conversation she has dreaded having for nine months. Both conversations, with Markie and David, are simple and uncomplicated, prompting many reviewers to say that Willow's transition from sick to healthy is too simple. With one short conversation, Willow's relationship with Markie, as well as her relationship with David, is fully repaired. In real life, these conversations, and the emotions of each individual, would likely be far more complicated than what is presented in the novel. It is interesting to note that in the moments before Willow speaks to David about the accident, she begins cutting herself but realizes that she doesn't want this outlet anymore. She wants to be healthy.



The major milestone in this section of the novel, however, is Willow's loss of virginity. Many reviewers have mixed emotions about this scene. First, some reviewers believe that Willow's decision to sleep with Guy shows her emotional maturity and they argue that a profound physical change is needed to coincide with the profound emotional change she is undergoing. Other reviewers, however, argue that the scene in which Willow sleeps with Guy sends a dangerous message to young girls. Willow is hugely emotional in the moments before she loses her virginity, crying out for someone to take care of her. Although Guy is certainly a loving and caring partner, critics fear that equating nurturing and sex sends the wrong message. This argument also coincides with the critique that Willow is too passive in her own recovery. Every major milestone in Willow's recovery relates to her relationship with Guy. In these situations, Willow is always seen as weak while Guy is seen as strong, taking care of Willow, his damsel in distress. For this reason, critics are also displeased with the ending of the novel. Although Willow ultimately throws away her razorblades, it is at Guy's bidding, not her own. In the end, however, readers will likely be pleased to see that Willow has been given a second chance, no matter how she reached that destination.



Characters

Willow Randall

Willow Randall is the fifteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. She is given very little physical description in the novel, but the reader learns that she has long brown hair, which she wears in braids on the sides of her head and that her skin is covered in scars from her self-mutilation. Seven months ago, Willow's parents had too much to drink at dinner and asked her to drive them home. It was a rainy night and the streets were wet. Despite the fact that Willow only had a learner's permit, she got behind the wheel and accidentally drove her parents car straight into a tree, instantly killing them. Willow lived and found herself unable to deal with the guilt and grief of her loss. Willow was forced to move in with her brother, David, who became her legal guardian after the accident. Although Willow and her brother had a wonderful relationship when she was growing up, they both struggle to come to terms with their new roles in each other's lives. David is unwilling or unable to talk to Willow about the accident, so Willow feels completely isolated and alone. To process the emotion boiling inside her, Willow has begun cutting into her flesh, producing a pain she can control and outlet for what burns inside her. When Willow is cutting, she can think about nothing but the pain, and a few moments later, that pain subsides. It is like a drug. Willow's keeps her secret hidden from everyone around her, including her brother, but the secrecy has forced Willow into a dark, lonely world in which she cannot interact with anyone lest she be found out. All this changes when she meets Guy, a seventeen-year-old schoolmate who takes an interest in Willow. Through her romantic relationship with Guy, Willow finds that she is able to process her emotions for the first time since her parents died. Guy guides Willow to deal with both her grief and her guilt in healthy ways, helping Willow overcome the razorblades altogether. At the end of the novel, thanks to her therapy with Guy, Willow feels as if she has a new beginning. For the first time, her future looks bright again.

Guy

Guy is the seventeen-year-old high school senior who befriends Willow when she enrolls in his high school after her parents' death. Like many of the other characters in the novel, Guy is given relatively little physical description, but the reader does learn that Guy is on crew team and has wonderfully muscled shoulders. In the novel, Guy has always been interested in Willow's beauty, but his interest in her changes when he is the first person to discover Willow's self-mutilation. When he first sees Willow's scars, Guy is horrified and threatens to tell Willow's brother the truth. When he realizes how much the truth would hurt David, he decides to make Willow his "project," helping her cope with her emotions in a healthier way than cutting into herself with the razorblade. Throughout his journey with Willow, Guy becomes closer to Willow than he anticipated, and falls deeply in love with her, perhaps because he sees all of Willow, even her flaws. Although Guy sees the most private parts of Willow's body, her scars, he takes his time before their relationship evolves into something sexual. Every romantic moment in



Willow and Guy's relationship is preceded by an emotional moment or breakthrough for Willow, which has led some critics to say that the sexual relationship advances as Willow becomes more vulnerable. While this may be true, it is clear that Guy genuinely cares about Willow and that he allows her to take the sexual side of their relationship at her own pace. At the end of the novel, Guy appears to have "saved" Willow from her self-destructive behavior.

David Randall

David Randall is Willow's older brother and guardian. David is married and has an infant daughter, but his perfect life is rocked when his parents die and he is forced to take in his fifteen-year-old sister. David doesn't cope well with this change in his life, and often pressures himself to be strong and unemotional. At night, however, David often sits at the kitchen table and weeps into his hands, a sound that haunts Willow. David works as a professor at the local college and takes his job seriously. Throughout the novel, Willow fears that David blames her for their parents' death and that he resents her for his new role as guarding in her life. In truth, however, David fears that he is not doing a good enough job as Willow's surrogate parent and his nighttime weeping is for the thought that he could have lost Willow that terrible night as well.

Cathy

Cathy is David's wife and Willow's sister-in-law. Cathy is a kind woman who does her best to make Willow feel at home when she moves in, including buying her watercolor paints in case Willow should like to cope with her emotions through art. When Cathy learns that Willow wishes she could baby-sit Isabelle, Cathy's daughter, Cathy entrusts Willow with the baby while she runs errands even though there is doubt as to whether Willow is emotionally ready for the task.

Isabelle

Isabelle is Willow's infant niece and the daughter of Cathy and David. When Willow moves in with David, she is jealous of the way her brother cares for his daughter, as Willow knows that no one will ever take care of her that way, with a parent's love, again.

Carlos

Carlos is Willow's co-worker at the university library. Whenever Guy comes to visit, Carlos always makes an excuse to let Willow off work early so they can spend time together.



Miss Hamilton

Miss Hamilton is Willow's boss at the university library. She is a highly organized woman with a pinched face who always seems to be scowling. She has very strict rules about behavior in the library and often scolds Willow for breaking the rules.

Kristin

Kristin is the redheaded girl from Willow's class with the scratch on her arm. When Willow first sees this scratch, she thinks that Kristin is a cutter and she feels as if the two are kindred spirits. After a horribly awkward conversation with the girl, however, Willow learns that Kristin's scratch is a result from scratching at a rash.

Mr. Mosten

Mr. Mosten is Willow's chemistry teacher. He is one of the first teachers to recognize that Willow is struggling emotionally and he goes out of his way to make Willow feel included in her new school by asking her to help set-up the chemistry lab.

Laurie

Laurie is one of the first girls to befriend Willow at her new school. Although Laurie doesn't know Willow's dark secret, she and Willow grow very close over the course of the novel, discussing everything from hair color to boys.

Andy

Andy is one of Guy's friends from crew team and the boyfriend of Chloe, one of Willow's casual friends. At the restaurant in chapter 13, Andy makes the horrible comments about the anorexic girl, insinuating that this girl treats herself so terribly because it is fashionable.

Markie

Markie is Willow's best friend from childhood. After her parents' death, Willow was unable to speak with Markie because she felt that the two no longer had anything in common. Markie continued to phone Willow, however, despite the fact that Willow never answered or returned the calls. At the end of the novel, Willow and Markie are reunited and Markie is able to tell Willow how deeply Willow's rejection affected her.



Objects/Places

Razorblades

Razorblades are Willow's most constant companion and her best friend since the accident that killed her parents. Willow uses the razorblades to cut into her skin, mutilating herself to control pain and mark her body with the guilt she feels inside. Willow purchases her razorblades in large boxes and takes care to keep them well hidden. Her razorblades are often referred to as her "supplies" in the novel.

The University Library

The University Library is where Willow works to make extra money to help David and Cathy make ends meet since moving in with them. Even though Willow is only in high school, she is given a job at the library because of David's pull and influence at the university. Willow hates her job because it reminds her too much of the library at her parents' house and her father's love of books before he died.

The Stacks

The Stacks are on the eleventh floor of the university library and are where all the rare books are held. The first time Willow and Guy meet, she takes him up into the stacks to find a book he is looking for. The two spend many more hours together in the stacks because it provides near privacy while Willow is working. The stacks are where the couple has many emotional conversations and where they share their first kiss.

Tristes Tropiques

Tristes Tropiques is the book that Guy is searching for in the stacks on the first day that he meets Willow. Willow has mixed reactions to helping Guy find this book because it was her father's favorite book. The two teenagers bond over their love of this classic piece of literature and at the end of the novel, Willow gives Guy her father's copy of the book.

Painting

Painting was Willow's favorite pastime before her parents died. When Willow moves in with David and Cathy, Cathy purchases a pack of watercolor paints for Willow in case she would like to process her emotions through art. After the accident, however, Willow is unable to lift a paintbrush, but she often looks at the world as if it is a painting.



The Bulfinch

The Bulfinch is the book that Willow is reading for her final project this academic year. Although Willow was once an excellent student who loved to read and analyze literature, she has struggled academically since her parents' death. Throughout the novel, Willow struggles to make headway on her final paper but always ends up distracted. At the end of the novel, David writes the paper for Willow as an act of unity with his sister.

The Bookstore

The Bookstore is a place that carries rare academic books and was once Willow's favorite place to visit with her father. Halfway through the novel, Willow visits the bookstore for the first time since her father's death in search of a book for David. When she reaches the bookstore, she is overwhelmed with memories of her father and almost falls apart completely once she is inside. After all her effort, Willow learns that the bookstore does not even carry the book she had been searching for, and Willow feels as if the emotional trauma of the day was for nothing.

The Tempest

The Tempest is the book that Willow purchases for Guy at the bookstore she once frequented with her father. In *The Tempest*, the character Prospero's books are a symbol of his power. The same could be said about Willow, David, and their parents: Books equal information, which equals power. Books are also the way that Willow and Guy relate to each other, strengthening their relationship.

Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur is the city where Guy grew up as a child. He tells Willow that everything was very different in Kuala Lumpur, from the people to the buildings to the food to the culture. It was difficult for Guy to adjust to his life there and talking about struggling to cope helps bond Willow and Guy.

The Setting

The Screwdriver was Willow's first instrument of self-mutilation. Willow self-harmed for the first time after her parents died and David asked her to help him disassemble one of the bookshelves in their childhood home. He handed her a screwdriver and left her alone. When faced with the books, Willow was overcome with such strong emotion that she nearly blacks out. When she resurfaces, she sees that she is stabbing herself with the screwdriver. She is shocked to see that for the first time, she is experiencing true pain, physical pain that matches the emotional pain for which she has no outlet. The

next time Willow sees the screwdriver, she has returned to her home with Guy on the day that she loses her virginity.



Themes

The Importance of Literature

Since Willow grew up with academic parents, she has a strong relationship with books, just as her older brother has and her parents had. Almost all of the strong memories Willow has of her parents are elicited through her experiences with books. For example, Willow allows herself to bond with Guy over the book *Tristes Tropiques* because it was her father's favorite book, and in the end of the novel she gives her father's copy to him. Willow also has a volatile reaction when Guy asks her to help him find a copy of a list of books, one of which was penned by her father. Books not only affect Willow's relationship with Guy, but also her relationship with David. Willow desperately wants to bond with David after the accident, and one way she attempts to is by visiting the old bookstore they frequented as children with their father. Just walking into the musty shop, Willow is overwhelmed with emotion. Although she does not find the book she is searching for, she does find a copy of *The Tempest* that she purchases as a gift for Guy. This purchase symbolizes Willow's transition from a dependence on her family to a dependence on Guy. Her book choice is also interesting because *The Tempest* focuses on the themes of loss and rebirth, with Persephone being abducted to the underworld. Persephone's journey from the underworld to rebirth is thematically similar to Willow's journey throughout the novel. Additionally, in *The Tempest*, Prospero's books are a symbol of his power. The same could be said about Willow. Books equal information, which equals power. Books are also the way that Willow and Guy relate to each other, strengthening their relationship.

Nurturing

One of the biggest losses that Willow feels after her parents' death is the loss of actually having parents. The fact that Willow's parents are both dead simply means that Willow is no longer anyone's daughter, which she equates to meaning that no one will ever care for her again. This loss is felt most acutely when Willow sees the way her brother David interacts with his infant daughter, Isabelle. A simple kiss on the forehead is enough to make Willow implode with envy because she knows that no man will ever kiss her forehead the same way, the way a father kisses his daughter. This jealousy is one of many major roadblocks Willow must overcome to heal her relationship with David. Much of Willow's need to be cared for is seen in her relationship with Guy. However, Willow equates nurturing with sex in her relationship with Guy, drawing stark critique of the young couple's relationship: is Willow too emotionally vulnerable to make firm decisions about her sexuality? This question is particularly important on the evening when Willow loses her virginity to Guy. Moments before, Willow had found a handwritten note from her mother reminding herself to buy calcium-enriched orange juice for Willow. This note, which starkly shows her mother's nurturing care for her daughter, leads Willow to an emotional outpouring in which she desperately pleads for Guy to take care of her. Her plea sounds like the plea of a little child begging for her parents, which is



why many critics claim Guy's decision to take Willow's virginity, consensual or not, is inappropriate.

Home

Willow lost many things on the day her parents died, including her feeling of home. Soon after the funeral, Willow is sent to live with her older brother, David, and his young family. David is recently married, with a good job and a beautiful baby daughter. His life is picture perfect until Willow arrives, shattering that vision. While Willow appreciates everything her brother has done for her, she does not feel truly at home with him. Cathy has gone out of her way to make Willow feel welcome, decorating her bedroom and purchasing watercolor paints for her, but Willow misses her old bedroom. As long as Willow longs for home, she remains emotionally tied to her loss and will be unable to move on from it. Therefore, it is important that Willow travel back to her childhood home to make amends with her emotions. In the novel, Guy brings Willow home in an act that symbolizes Willow's decreased dependence on her family and her increased dependence on Guy. The fact that Willow loses her virginity - thus becoming a woman - in her childhood bedroom again highlights her emotional transformation. After this experience, Willow feels comfortable in body for the first time since the accident, and feels completely safe - at home - in Guy's arms. Because Willow has found a place to metaphorically lay her head, she is comfortable enough to deal with her emotional burdens. As soon as Willow finds a home for her heart with Guy, she is able to mend the rest of her broken relationships, including her relationship with Markie, David, and herself.



Style

Point of View

Willow is told in third-person limited omniscience narration through Willow's perspective, which means that the reader is held very close to Willow's thoughts and emotions throughout the novel. Although the narration of the novel is completely reliable, it takes the reader through the seemingly endless twists and turns of Willow's fragile emotional state as she comes to grips with the death of her parents. Although the narration deals with incredibly emotional and powerful themes, it is interesting to note that the narration is extremely stark and straightforward holding the reader at arms length from the emotion of the story, mimicking the ways Willow holds everyone - even those whom she claims to love - at arms length from her heart. Through this point of view, the reader is given access into Willow's thoughts, fears, insecurities, and hope. Because the novel is told in present-tense narration, all emotional and physical action has a strong sense of urgency as the narrator does not take the time to reflect on past events before moving onto the next. This propelling narration also mimics Willow's emotional state, particularly when she is in the act of self-mutilation. During these times, Willow only considers the exact moment and not the past or the future. She is completely present in the moment and so is the reader. This point of view is important to the novel since one of the most important themes in the novel is Willow's emotional growth, particularly in her relationship with her brother and Guy. There could not be the dramatic impact of this growth if not for the reader's peek into Willow's thoughts and emotions.

Setting

Willow's story is set in an unnamed city during modern times. It is interesting to note that Julia Hoban includes very little description of the characters and the world they inhabit. This unusual decision is rarely successful in modern literature because it often leaves the audience feeling confused and isolated, but in this unique instance, Hoban's choice forces the reader to focus on the novel's emotions, relating to the characters not through their physical descriptions, but through their emotional turmoil. What sparse details the reader learns about the university town where Willow lives is that she has a beautiful view of the city from her bedroom window: "In the morning and evenings the park is filled with joggers. In the afternoon young mothers take over and there are always plenty of lovers winding their way down the leaf-strewn paths" (p. 21). Due to her emotional state, Willow spends very little time outside of her home, school, or her workplace, so many of the key scenes in the novel happen in one of these three places. Perhaps the most important of the three is the stacks in the university library where Willow works. The stacks are on the eleventh floor of the university library and are where the rare books are held. The first time Willow and Guy meet, she takes him up into the stacks to find a book he is looking for. The two spend many more hours together in the stacks, which is lit by a single light on a timer, because it provides near



privacy while Willow is working. The stacks are where the couple has many emotional conversations and where they share their first kiss.

Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for teenage readers, the language tends to be conversational and easy to follow. The novel is clearly geared toward modern teenagers and is written in modern teen-speak. Adult readers may be confused by some of the teenaged vernacular, but are given ample contextual clues to understand its meaning. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, but also gains momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page, and often this structure works. The structure of the novel not only entices readers to carry on to the next chapter by utilizing cliffhanger phrases as each paragraph propels the reader on with its present-tense action written with the sense of urgency that matches Willow's emotional intensity. Occasionally, there are passages utilizing literary words and phrases that may be a hindrance to some readers, particularly when Willow and Guy discuss their favorite literary classics. If the reader does not have knowledge of these texts, these long passages can be somewhat isolating and boring, particularly for younger readers. If the reader can battle through these scenes of long dialogue, they will be rewarded with rich layers of literary symbolism that alter the way the reader views Willow, her relationships, and her emotional journey. This novel is told mostly through exposition, with the exception of Willow's scenes with Guy, to highlight the isolation Willow feels in the world. After her parents' death, Willow closes herself off to the outside world, forcing herself into reclusive isolation. Because of this, the reader's only insight into the world is through Willow's thoughts and emotions. As the novel progresses, and Willow begins to come out of her shell, long passages of exposition are replaced with scenes of snappy dialogue that help to characterize Willow and the world around her.

Structure

This novel is composed of sixteen chapters ranging in length from 4 to 35 pages. The short chapters tend to deal primarily with Willow's emotional state, while the longer chapters explore the various relationships Willow is forming. The novel fluctuates between packing loads of action into short passages and contrasting that action with long passages of seemingly rambling dialogue. This contrast is seen most starkly in the scenes with Willow interacting with her schoolmates. There is very little characterization at work in these sections and many readers will be bored by the teenagers' mundane conversations. It should be assumed that these scenes are used to show Willow's character growth, but there is little depth outside of this. A large portion of the novel is concerned with exploring Willow's relationship with Guy. Is it romantic or is it platonic? This conflict, which never truly reads as a conflict to the audience, will likely grow tiresome for most readers. From the first moment of Guy's introduction to Willow, there is no question that he has romantic feelings for her. Therefore, the author's attempt to create conflict in Guy's motivations are tiresome and never fully translate to the reader.



The plot of the novel is relatively straightforward, surrounding the emotional transformation of Willow's love for Guy. At the opening of the novel, Willow is a lost soul, mutilating her body to cope with her internal pain. With the introduction of Guy, Willow has a driving force helping her face her demons and cope with the guilt and grief of her parents' death.



Quotes

"You couldn't really say that something that hurts so badly feels good exactly. It's more that it just feels right. And something that feels so right couldn't be bad. It has to be good" (p. 4).

"Seeing her brother should be the lone bright spot in the otherwise bleak landscape that is her life, and yet it simply isn't so. Because somehow, that rainy night last March didn't just end her parents' lives. Somehow - as surely as if he had been in the car with them - she lost her brother that night too" (p. 28).

"Yell at me! Hit me! Do anything! But stop being like this! Stop acting like nothing's happened! Stop acting like you're okay with it all!" (p. 117).

"Willow hates to join them, because she knows that as soon as she steps into the kitchen the illusion will instantly be destroyed. Her presence reminds everyone that there's something desperately wrong, that this isn't just an ordinary family going about its business. This family is different. This is a fractured family" (p. 141).

"Willow opens her bag slowly, calmly. There's none of the frantic urgency that she usually associates with her need. Somehow it just seems inevitable now. She is someone who cuts. It's that simple. She's someone who killed her parents. She's someone who has lost her brother. And she is someone who has to cut" (p. 155).

"Still, along with shame is another feeling. She's connected to him - maybe by a thread of blood, maybe by the bond of the razor, or maybe by something else again - but whatever has caused it, it's something that she cannot deny" (p. 189).

"This pain, this physical pain, was flowing through my veins like heroin, and I was numb, immune to the rest of it, I couldn't feel anything but the pain, and I knew that I had found a way to save myself" (p. 222).

"His sobs wound her far more than anything she can inflict on herself, but it is not only pain that she feels as she watches him. She takes a bittersweet comfort in the fact that her brother is capable of feeling such grief" (p. 254).

"She is amazed, really amazed, that the razor managed to numb her so well and for so long, because the way she's feeling now is so overwhelming, so overpowering, that it would take a lot more than a few slashes with a blade to transmute her anguish" (p. 293).

"Maybe by allowing herself to care about somebody, to love somebody, she herself set the entire chain in motion, and maybe it is his love that enabled her to endure that grief that issued forth" (p. 304).



"We need to talk about the way things were...We need to talk about them. Maybe they're dead, but they shouldn't be dead to us. They shouldn't be dead between us" (p. 314).

"I have always been responsible for you. Just by virtue of loving you, I've had a responsibility to you and for you. You have that responsibility to me too, and to anyone that will ever love. But it's different not" (p. 317).



Topics for Discussion

Throughout the novel, neither Willow nor Guy is given a physical description by the narrator. Why do you think this is? Were you able to connect with Willow as a character without knowing what she looked like? How does this omission fit into the themes of the novel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Willow's relationship with her brother David. What had their relationship been like before the accident? How did both Willow and David's roles within the family change after their parents' death? Why didn't David ever confront Willow about the accident? What does this say about their relationship? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen their arguments.

How did Willow manage to keep her self-destructive secret hidden from the outside world for as long as she did? What warning signs was she giving out that something was wrong? Why were these warning signs ignored? Who, if anyone, should have been more aware and who should have intervened to protect Willow? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does Guy manage to reach Willow in a way that no one else had before? Do you think Guy's responsibility for Willow's safety was a dangerous undertaking? Why or why not? What first drew Guy to Willow? Do you think Guy truly loves Willow as a woman, or simply as a project? How can you tell? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

How does Willow justify her self-destructive behavior? Why is it particularly symbolic that Willow harms her body, given the traumatic experiences of her past year? How are Willow's emotional and physical state inextricably intertwined? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Willow's relationship with books. Where did Willow learn her love of books? How does Willow's relationship with books affect her relationship with Guy? How does it affect her healing process? Which books in particular have a strong effect on Willow? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Willow's emotional journey throughout the novel. In the end, do you think Willow was truly healed? Why or why not? Who do you think should be credited for "saving" Willow? Do you think Willow was proactive enough in her journey? What message does Willow's journey and her relationships send to young girls in trouble? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.