

The Year of Secret Assignments Study Guide

The Year of Secret Assignments by Jaclyn Moriarty

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Plot Summary

A Year of Secret Assignments tells the story of three private school girls who are forced to write letters to boys at a public high school with a bad reputation. Throughout this experience, all the students learn about expectations, honesty, and themselves.

Lydia, Emily and Cassie are three tenth grade girls at Ashbury High, a private high school in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia. As part of an English class assignment they must write letters to students at neighboring high school Brookfield, which has a terrible reputation. In addition to this assignment, as part of their long-lived friendship, Lydia periodically assigns Cassie and Emily secret missions (or "secret assignments") ranging from baking to shoplifting. The Pen Pal Project gets off to a bumpy start, with each girl unsure of how much to reveal about herself to the strangers at Brookfield. Lydia provocatively writes outlandish whims to her new pen pal, Seb. Seb doesn't know where the reality of Lydia ends and the fantasy begins, but automatically distrusts her because her father is a judge. Emily's pen pal Charlie takes her letter at face value, believing she is vapid and superficial - but Emily is simply seeking the approval of her English teacher with her bland letter. Cassie tells her pen pal Matthew all about her counseling sessions, but doesn't reveal why she is in therapy: her father died from leukemia the previous year, an event which deeply affected all three girls. Matthew writes back brief and violent letters, uninterested in getting to know Cassie.

As the letters continue, the pen pals slowly start to trust each other: Emily takes charge of teaching Charlie how to date, Lydia and Seb trade "covert missions" to test each other's daring, and after a great deal of one-sided correspondence, Cassie and Matthew start to bond over a mutual love of music. Lydia's "covert missions" from Seb require getting him out of his exams by pulling pranks at Brookfield. One of the pranks inadvertently involves Charlie, who believes he is saving the school from a gas leak...only to be humiliated in finding out that Brookfield doesn't use gas. As a result, Charlie obsesses about the girl who made the prank call that led to his humiliation, which happens to be Emily, on a secret assignment from Lydia. But Emily won't reveal the truth, admonishing him to let it go. All three sets of pen pals decide to meet: Emily and Charlie will go on a practice date so he can eventually win the girl of his dreams, Christina, and as time passes, Emily and Charlie begin to develop true feelings for each other. Lydia challenges Seb to a covert mission in which one of them has to recognize the other first in a public place, based not on pictures or descriptions, but their letters: Lydia doesn't know that Seb has already looked her up online, and is suspicious when he easily identifies her. Cassie and Matthew agree to meet so she can give him some information on children's rights that will help him get out of some trouble at school, but he never shows up. Lydia and Emily learn that there is no one named Matthew at Brookfield and begin to worry that Cassie is going insane. When Cassie finally meets up with "Matthew," a boy whose real name is Paul Wilson, and is cruelly taunted and mocked, the girls decide to seek revenge: steal Paul Wilson's girlfriend, Christina, away from him. It's a win-win situation: Charlie gets to be with the girl he loves and Paul loses what he loves most in the world. The plan backfires when Emily admits she really likes Charlie but before they can go on a real date, Charlie realizes Emily made the prank call



to Brookfield that embarrassed him so much. Though she apologizes, he can't forgive her. Similarly, Lydia can't forgive Seb when she discovers he had seen her picture in a magazine article about her celebrity mother before they met and lied about it. Cassie, who admits she wrote to Matthew because he initially scared her, is afraid she will go through life scared like her father. Her fear compounds itself with fears that she will never follow her dream of being a singer, nor do anything to make her father proud.

Seb's anger flares after Paul maliciously recounts what he did to Cassie and he beats him up, sending Paul to the principal to get Seb expelled. Before he can get there, the girls intervene so Seb can get to an art competition he has entered. They use Paul's ego against him, tricking him into believing he has a role in a movie that films immediately. The girls think they have won their revenge, but find themselves in trouble when an anonymous witness claims they have been vandalizing Brookfield in a dangerous escalating rivalry between the schools. The teachers at Ashbury want to read Lydia, Emily, and Cassie's private papers in order to prove their involvement in the pranks, but the girls demand their right to privacy, and their lawyer parents back them up. An informal hearing is held at the school in which Emily presents a case to defend the girls' rights. Despite her fears about her own intelligence, Emily creates a solid argument in favor of teenagers' right to privacy, and wins the case. However, the girls are still the alleged vandals and stand at risk for expulsion. Seb, suspicious that the witness is Paul taking his own revenge, takes Cassie and Charlie to break into Paul's house, where they find evidence that he committed the crimes against Brookfield himself. They show up at the school meeting just in time to keep the girls from getting in trouble. Despite his sterling reputation, Paul cannot defend himself and the girls are exonerated.

As a show of unity between the schools, all the pen pals must participate together in the spring concert. The book ends happily with Emily and Charlie starting to date, as well as Lydia and Seb, who helps Lydia's dream of becoming an author come true by illustrating a book she writes. Cassie, coming to terms with how the death of her father has changed her, gets up the courage to sing a song in the concert, using one of "Matthew's" letters for the lyrics.



Chapters 1-4: Lydia's Notebook, Emily's Weekend, Cassie's Diary, Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board

Chapters 1-4: Lydia's Notebook, Emily's Weekend, Cassie's Diary, Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board Summary

In the first four chapters of *The Year of Secret Assignments*, the three main protagonists, Lydia, Emily, and Cassie are introduced, each through the girls' unique writing style. The reader learns about the main school project the girls are working on, which will make up the bulk of the novel's action.

Chapter 1: Lydia Jackson-Oberman begins to fill out "Your Notebook," a trademarked book full of questions intended to inspire burgeoning young authors. As Lydia fills in the book, she is dubious about its utility. The notebook is a gift from her father, which further negates its value in her eyes. Instead of simply answering the book's questions, Lydia sarcastically "converses" with it. She describes her two best friends, Emily Thompson and Cassie Aganovic. Her English teacher, Mr. Botherit, announces they will participate in the Ashbury-Brookfield Pen Pal Project, in which they exchange letters with another local high school. He hopes to instill in them an appreciation for the art of letter writing. Lydia, Emily, and Cassie are unenthusiastic about the project because Brookfield students have a bad reputation.

Chapter 2: Emily's father Benjamin Thompson writes to Emily offering advice for her weekend, while he and her mother are away at a conference (they are lawyers). He humorously describes in detail what is happening in the exact moment he is writing and then advises her to have fun with Lydia and Cassie while they are away. He also warns her not to listen to Lydia because she is "nothing but trouble" (Page 9).

Chapter 3: Cassie writes in her diary after the three girls spent a low-key weekend at Emily's house. Lydia was preoccupied with her Notebook: though she hates her father and his gift, her desire to be an author is keeping her writing. Lydia's Notebook reminds Cassie about her diary, a birthday gift from her own dad when she was twelve. She's never written in it before now, because she's "not the kind of person who writes in diaries" (Page 12).

Chapter 4: Announcements for the students in Lydia, Emily, and Cassie's class include: Those interested in participating in the spring concert are encouraged to volunteer during an upcoming assembly. A student-written notice protests the pen pal project because Brookfield students are dangerous. Mr. Botherit responds with a notice asking



the students to keep an open mind about Brookfield students and reminding them that participation will count toward their grades.

Chapters 1-4: Lydia's Notebook, Emily's Weekend, Cassie's Diary, Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board Analysis

In these short chapters the three protagonists are introduced through their individualized style. Lydia is sarcastic and scoffs at her notebook, but she keeps writing in it because of her deep desire to be an author. Her style of writing illustrates that she does not like to follow the rules - when the notebook instructs her to write simply about what she did when she woke up the day before, she makes up an elaborate story about having a disease that will turn her into a road sign. Though her tone is whimsical and humorous in this creative tale, her subject is dark: "I knew I was not long for this world. Why me? I kept thinking. Why me?" (Page 4). She is independent and sarcastic, and the reader learns that she has a history of getting in trouble.

Emily's is the only chapter not in her own voice, instead taking the form of a letter from her father. The letter has the formal structure one would expect from a lawyer, but the tone is gentle and humorous. His warning against Lydia, while joking, is the second indication in the first ten pages that Lydia actively seeks trouble. Because the reader hasn't yet heard from Emily herself, her character isn't as clear as Lydia's. Readers may wonder why Moriarty chose not to give Emily an outlet to write in the first person. From her father's letter, readers can only infer that Emily grew up in an intellectual but indulgent environment (her parents don't mind three teenage girls spending the weekend in the house alone, nor do they give Emily the responsibility of caring for her younger brother).

Cassie's diary entry is also mysterious. She claims that she isn't the type of person to write in a diary, the reader does not yet know why Lydia's Notebook incites her to make this out-of-character choice. Both gifts are from the girls' fathers. While Lydia is skeptical of the Notebook in part because it is from her father, Cassie, a self-proclaimed non-writer, seeks the diary after three years, perhaps because it is from her father. Given the negative response to the pen pal project, the reader can anticipate there will be conflict with the Brookfield students with whom they swap letters. Because the Ashbury students refer to Brookfield in terms of delinquency and ignorance, the reader can infer that Ashbury students perceive themselves as well-behaved and intelligent, i.e., "better" than Brookfield.



Chapters 5-9: Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Lydia's Notebook

Chapters 5-9: Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Lydia's Notebook Summary

In these chapters, the reader gets the first sets of letters back and forth between the girls and the students at Brookfield. The girls are writing to unknown students in their first letter, so they mainly just introduce themselves.

Chapter 5: In Emily's first letter to her pen pal at Ashbury, readers hear Emily's voice for the first time. Her letter is bubbly and full of exclamation points. She writes about how much she loves shopping, chocolate, and horses. She teases her pen pal with the ambiguous information that she receives "secret assignments," but she but she won't reveal what they are or who they're from. Finally she praises Mr. Botherit for the pen pal project. Lydia's letter begins, "I am a fish" (Page 19). Her letter is full of fantasy, and she abruptly asks her pen pal to send her marijuana to sell. Cassie tells her pen pal that she went to counseling with her mother and that the counselor instructed her to find a stranger to tell about herself. The counselor told her mother to write a letter to Cassie's father. Cassie found the drunken letter her mother wrote, describing Cassie as a baby, so Cassie sends it to her pen pal as a way of doing her counseling "homework."

Chapter 6: The girls receive their first letters from their Brookfield pen pals. Emily's pen pal is Charlie Taylor, whose first letter mocks her girlish interests and "old lady" expressions. He thinks she sounds like a stereotypical private school girl with whom he has nothing in common. Emily only piqued his interest by mentioning the secret assignments, which he'd like to know more about. He also claims to have a "supersonic" memory. Lydia's pen pal, Sebastian (Seb) Mantegna, matches her fantastical tone, but quickly turns skeptical, wondering when she's being serious. For example, if she really wants pot, he'd rather meet to discuss it. Cassie's pen pal is Matthew Dunlop, who writes a single sentence: "Eat shit and die, private school slag" (Page 26).

Chapter 7: Irritated by his judgmental tone, Emily writes an angry letter to Charlie, claiming she only wrote what she did because she thought Mr. Botherit was going to read it. Now she knows no one is reading them, so she will cease her correspondence. Lydia is more straightforward in her second letter to Seb. Her parents forgot her most recent birthday, and her father only bought her a present when she reminded him. She won't meet Seb, but wants to hear about his dreams. Undeterred by Matthew's



rudeness, Cassie writes him again, claiming to like him despite his reticence. She is relieved to share with him that her mother wasn't upset that she sent Matthew the letter to her father.

Chapter 8: Charlie admits that he is impressed with the personality Emily shows in her second letter. He teases her about Mr. Botherit and makes inappropriate suggestions about her relationship with her English teacher. Seb sends Lydia a picture he drew of the scene she described on her birthday morning. He wants to know if he can trust her and challenges her to set off the Brookfield alarm at a specific time. He tells her about a dream in which he is a kookaburra smashing a snake. Matthew's letter to Cassie is again brief and threatening.

Chapter 9: Lydia once again ignores the straightforward instructions laid out in the notebook. Instead she writes about her worry for Cassie, who won't talk about her pen pal. She knows Emily is too stubborn to stop writing to hers before she's gotten the last word. She wonders if Seb is dangerous, and whether or not she should accept his challenge.

Chapters 5-9: Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Lydia's Notebook Analysis

In these first few rounds of letters, none of the students seems to make a good impression on his or her pen pal. Emily is more concerned about her grades than actually getting to know someone new, Lydia seems intent on getting a reaction by being particularly strange and provocative, and Cassie starts to open up for the first time - to a stranger.

All three girls avow the strength and importance of their friendship, and perhaps because of this strong bond they feel they have little to lose with these new people. Emily actually reveals more about Lydia to Charlie than Lydia does to Seb. Through Emily's letters, readers learn that Lydia's father is a Supreme Court judge, and her mother, Marianne Jackson, is a celebrity. The parents of all three girls are involved in the legal profession and are friends themselves. The girls have been best friends since grade school. Though letter-writing offers a straightforward way for Moriarty to incorporate exposition, it is important to note these characters often divulge more about their friends than they do about themselves. Readers should recognize this as a conscious choice the girls are making in order to protect themselves from the potential judgment of revealing private information.

In her Notebook, Lydia describes a scene from grade school in which Cassie rings the school bell - a special treat on a student's birthday - but she does it badly. Emily proclaims she fails at this simple task because she "doesn't like to be the center of attention" (Page 39). The inclusion of such memories act in the novel as flashbacks, and readers should note them particularly as important insights into the inner life of the



characters that will be relevant as the plot moves forward. Keen readers will note that Emily frequently misuses words: angiogram (Page 16), forgery (Page 18), superlative (Page 27), incompetent (Page 28). Readers can often determine the word Emily meant given the context because the correct word often has a similar sound to the word she used. Emily's attempts at impressive vocabulary are calculated to make her sound intelligent, confident, and authoritative, and she clearly doesn't know they have the opposite affect when she uses them incorrectly.

Lydia and Seb seem to be playing a written version of "chicken," as each tries to feel out if they can trust the other. Seb invokes strong imagery to make a point about how he feels about deceptive people. He asks Lydia if she is a snake, a symbol often associated with Satan and his cunning involvement in the loss of Eden. When he describes his dream about becoming a kookaburra and destroying a snake, he sends Lydia a none-too-subtle message about how he feels about betrayal. Lydia views the letters as a power struggle - if she accepts Seb's challenge, she might prove she's not afraid, but it also proves he's got some control over her. She does not relish that thought.



Chapter 10: Autumn Term/Emily and Charlie

Chapter 10: Autumn Term/Emily and Charlie Summary

Enraged by Charlie's letter, Emily tells him (repeatedly) that he "talks a pile of crap" (Page 42). She tantalizes him with news of a secret assignment, but promises him only empty envelopes from now on. Charlie ignores her wrath, instead describing his heroic effort to save Brookfield when he inadvertently answers a phone call announcing a gas leak in the school: Charlie sounded the alarm to evacuate. Emily responds with the threatened empty envelope. Charlie calls her out on including a note declaring the envelope is empty. He is humiliated to learn the school doesn't use gas and he was the victim of a prank. His brother Brian, a cop, mocks him mercilessly for his error, and Charlie gets depressed. When he goes to the police station to make a statement to help catch the prank caller, he finds himself further scorned. He gets more depressed by Emily's empty envelopes. He apologizes for offending Emily and admits he hasn't dated and can't relate well to girls. Emily relents, accepting his apology and offering to help him with girls. She advises him to put the gas leak incident behind him. Charlie's faith in humanity is restored by Emily's kindness. He's only too happy to accept her assistance, and they trade letters about how to behave with girls. Charlie admits he likes a girl named Christina Kratovac who just started dating someone. His letter is interrupted when the sprinklers go off at Brookfield, cancelling an exam he's supposed to take. Though he works on a detailed memory of the gas leak prank call, Emily discourages him from thinking about it. Emily decides she wants to help Charlie win Christina, and after a lot of advice that goes nowhere, she decides they should go out as a practice date. They plan to meet for a movie.

Chapter 10: Autumn Term/Emily and Charlie Analysis

As Emily and Charlie warm up to each other, the reader sees that their lives are very different. Emily comes from a world of privilege where she and her friends are at liberty to paint their walls with murals and her biggest problem is not getting to see her horses enough. Charlie's house is full of fighting and he can never have enough peace to study, thus he has poor grades. Emily is secure and confident to the point where she feels she can boss Charlie around. She makes strong declarative statements like, "You should always ask girls out when you are blind [drunk]" (Page 55) and, "So this letter is a reminder to eat fresh mint from your mother's mint garden while you are asking a girl out, and to move out of your home" (Page 61). Not only is Emily's advice illogical and impractical, she blatantly ignores the very real problems with which his family struggles, such as his father's violent tendencies and his mother's nervous breakdowns. Emily only offers advice on superficial concerns. Emily shows a marked lack of self-awareness with how absurd her advice sounds. Charlie "follows" one arbitrary suggestion: Emily instructs him to change his name to start with "A" and he signs his



letters with names like "Archibald" and "Aristotle." Emily reneges and decides Charlie is an "acceptable" name and tells him to stop. He ignores her increasingly irritated commands to stop using "A" names, until she is forced to admit "I WAS COMPLETELY WRONG WITH MY INSPIRATION ABOUT CHANGING YOUR NAME" (Page 70). Emily's reaction to Charlie following her advice and then refusing to stop following it implies she is not used to people listening to her and seeing her irrational proclamations reflected back to her. It further suggests she is not used to admitting she is wrong, since it takes her three letters to actually say the words.

In one of her letters, Emily tells about Cassie, divulging that her father died the previous year. This disclosure comes on page 59, and readers should note that Cassie herself has never revealed this important event in her life. Emily also claims Cassie is a great singer, but too shy to do it in public. This supports Lydia's previous memory claiming Cassie has an aversion for being the center of attention. Readers may start to see a pattern among the girls, that they often know each other better than they know themselves. Emily thinks Cassie might be keeping secrets, particularly about her pen pal. Given the harsh letters Cassie has already received from Matthew, readers know she is indeed keeping secrets. Cassie's secrecy clearly chafes Emily, and represents a fundamental difference between them: Cassie is reticent about sharing (remember she doesn't consider herself the type of person to write in diaries, and she sent her mother's letter to Matthew as a way to avoid talking about herself) while Emily declares, "You must express your feelings. It is a rule" (Page 59).

Alarms go off twice at Brookfield (once thanks to Charlie's own initiative) postponing his exams, and he misses a third exam when the test papers are stolen from his teacher's car. Readers should anticipate Lydia's involvement with one or all of these incidents as part of her challenges from Seb.



Chapter 11: Autumn Term/Lydia and Seb

Chapter 11: Autumn Term/Lydia and Seb Summary

Lydia writes another fantasy-laden letter to Seb. Though she wasn't serious about the marijuana, she accepts his challenge to set off his school alarm, claiming to have "the perfect person for the job" (Page 74). She dares him to participate in a series of "covert operations" to determine which of them excels at risky behavior. She is impressed by the artistic ability he demonstrates in the drawing he sends her. Seb still questions whether she is serious. As the time for the prescribed false alarm approaches and Seb doesn't hear from Lydia, he writes increasingly angry letters, accusing her of being untrustworthy. But when the alarm goes off, he gushingly thanks her for following through. She still doesn't respond though he sends her many admiring letters. Lydia finally rebukes him for calling her a deceitful snake over something as insignificant as avoiding an exam. She tells him, "You were making assumptions about me, and imagining you knew me, and the fact is, Seb, you don't" (Page 79). Lydia challenges Seb to pull a prank at the mall, a mission he completes with ease, relaying the details in a "Special Covert Operations Report." He apologizes for questioning her character. Lydia forgives him but still wonders how truthful he is.

He next challenges Lydia to set off the Brookfield sprinkler system at another specific time. Lydia accepts, but is disappointed that his missions are narcissistically designed to get him out of exams. Seb denies this reasoning. He continuously pushes to meet Lydia in person, but she evades his requests. Lydia breezes through her assignment, inspiring Seb's devotion. He completes his next mission to decorate the reserve, an ominous wooded area behind Ashbury that Lydia and her friends traverse when cutting school. Seb urgently requests she create a way for him to avoid an exam with a teacher known as the Rattlesnake; he finally admits to exam dodging. Seb is beyond impressed when the exam papers are stolen from the Rattlesnake's car, but Lydia credits a friend with a talent for locks. She shrugs off his repeated demands to meet, reminding him he doesn't know what she looks like. He believes she is gorgeous. She finally relents, agreeing to meet him in a double secret assignment: whomever identifies the other first at an appointed time at the Blue Danish Cafe, wins. The winner must then immediately leave, a rule Seb only reluctantly accepts. They give each other clues to help pinpoint themselves, and the chapter ends right before their scheduled meeting.

Chapter 11: Autumn Term/Lydia and Seb Analysis

Trust is a major theme in the letters between Lydia and Seb. They each challenge the other to be trustworthy through their series of missions, rather than letting trust grow organically as they get to know each other. Though both characters have strong personalities, Lydia often only indirectly confronts issues that make her uncomfortable. For example, when writing to Seb on her computer, she speaks to the letter template prompt's "Paper Clip Man" rather than directly to Seb himself to admit she doesn't want



pot, and to warn Seb circuitously against threatening her passive aggressively with his kookaburra/snake dream (Page 74). She consistently evades his requests to meet in person, preferring to leave their friendship in the more indirect world of letter-writing. She prefers playing spy games to straightforward expositional conversation. For example, though she tells Seb her father is a judge, she never reveals that her mother is a celebrity. It is likely that Lydia seeks to keep her interactions obscure as a way of maintaining control in the relationship.

Seb's letters present a complicated individual. He fits the Brookfield "bad seed" mold with his constant requests for Lydia to assist him in evading exams (he proves himself a liar by equivocating about his motivations when Lydia calls him out on skipping tests; readers should note this tendency to hedge the truth), while also presenting himself as a doting big brother and gamely accepting all of Lydia's silly challenges. He uses the imagery of soccer constantly to relate to his world: he threatens to give Lydia a "yellow card" whenever he is unsure of her meaning and intentions, and creates an unusual simile by declaring Lydia "as beautiful as the Irish equalizer by Robbie Keane" (Page 85) during a particularly tense World Cup match. When Lydia successfully orchestrates the first false alarm evacuating Brookfield, Seb calls her "the most beautiful, gorgeous, unbelievable girl in the country" (Page 77). Seb consistently refers to Lydia's good looks though they have never met. Lydia sarcastically admonishes him that, "You need to see a person to know what they look like" (Page 89). Keen readers may wonder if this exchange foreshadows a revelation that Seb does know what Lydia looks like. Though Lydia is smart, funny and full of bravado, she presents herself as someone with a lot of insecurity about her appearance. When setting the rules of the recognition challenge, she assures Seb he'll be glad to leave as soon as he sees her. She claims the point of the challenge is "to recognize the other's soul, not their face" (Page 91). Once again Lydia relishes the indirect path to recognition rather than anything as straightforward as exchanging photos.

Finally, many pieces of the puzzle from Chapter 10 fall into place: Lydia did in fact orchestrate all three skipped exams for Seb (and by extension Charlie), but she had help: someone else placed the call to Brookfield about the gas leak, and someone else picked the locks of the Rattlesnake's car to steal the exams.



Chapter 12: Autumn Term/Cassie and Matthew

Chapter 12: Autumn Term/Cassie and Matthew Summary

A classmate named Bindy MacKenzie tells Cassie she believes Matthew is a trumpet player. In his next letter, Matthew threatens to rip Cassie's eyes out if she doesn't stop writing, to which she responds that she has good eyesight. She tells him she, Lydia, and Emily cut school a lot and go to movies. They cut school less than they used to because they once hurt a teacher's feelings for skipping a study session, for which the three girls each blamed the other and stopped speaking. Cassie reveals to Matthew that Lydia gives her and Emily secret assignments. When Matthew threatens to break her fingers, Cassie claims she has long fingers, good for playing piano and picking locks. Cassie lies to Claire, her counselor, about her greatest fear, but admits to Claire that sometimes she raises her hand when she's alone. Cassie wonders if Claire and Matthew think she is crazy. She invites Matthew to stop threatening her and just tell her about himself.

Matthew stops writing until Cassie tells him Claire wants to know about him, so she's going to show her Matthew's letters. Cassie's mother advocates for children's rights to self-expression, but she thinks Matthew's letters might upset her. Despite this, Cassie also plans to show the letters to her mother as well. Matthew finally concedes, telling Cassie he wants to be a pilot and loves playing his trumpet. Though impressed that Matthew finally wrote, Cassie hopes he didn't think she was blackmailing him about his letters. Matthew admits he has an attitude problem but claims he has a valid, though private, reason for it. Since he finally responded, he hopes Cassie will stop writing now. She doesn't. Matthew starts to open up, claiming playing trumpet "gives [him] a reason to live" (Page 111). Matthew finally admits he dislikes Ashbury girls because he dated one who betrayed him and got him into so much trouble he can't play the trumpet in a school concert. Cassie reciprocates with her own secret, admitting she wanted to sing in the spring concert, but couldn't bring herself to raise her hand. Cassie advises Matthew on how to get his trumpet back, but he only gets into more trouble. He doesn't blame Cassie for the advice. He feels badly for threatening her and believes she must be pretty. He himself feels very messed up. The tension between his divorced parents wears him out. He is grateful for Cassie's kindness, but she admits it amused her to enrage him with her continued letters. She offers to ask her mom, who has worked in child advocacy, for advice on his behalf. Matthew has developed a big crush on Cassie, though he worries she might still avenge his early nastiness. Cassie randomly asks Matthew for information about a teacher called the Rattlesnake. Matthew gratefully accepts the offer of help from Cassie's mother, and obliges with information about his teacher. They agree to meet in the reserve so Cassie can give Matthew the information from her mother.



Chapter 12: Autumn Term/Cassie and Matthew Analysis

By relating a memory about skipping a study session and the fight that ensued among the girls, Cassie reveals that Lydia ended the fight by giving Emily and Cassie a "secret assignment" to bake an apology cake together. This casual story begins to fit many pieces of the secret assignment puzzle together: When Cassie claims to be good at picking locks because of her long fingers, readers know who Lydia assigned to break into the Rattlesnake's car to steal the exams. Readers will recall from the beginning of Chapter 10 that Emily gets a secret assignment that coincides with Lydia assuring Seb in Chapter 11 that she knows the perfect person to set off the alarm at Brookfield. Readers could safely assume Emily is this person. There is an irony in the way the events of the story unfold. Trust is a major stumbling block as these teenagers get to know each other. Both Charlie and Matthew have come to trust Emily and Cassie, but they are the ones pulling these pranks at Brookfield.

In Chapter 5, Cassie avoids her counseling "homework" to tell a stranger about herself by sending Matthew the letter her mother wrote about her. In this chapter, Cassie relates a counseling session with her mother, in which her mother uses her copyright law knowledge to derail the counselor. It is clear Cassie and her mother intentionally avoid talking about what has brought them to counseling in the first place. Readers can assume it is the death of Cassie's father, but Cassie still has not revealed he is dead to Matthew or in her diary. This is the biggest pain in her life and she cannot talk about it. Instead she and her mother band together to mock the counselor rather than facing their problems. This fact is further demonstrated when Cassie can't reveal her greatest fear to her counselor.

Cassie spends most of her initial letters talking about what happens in counseling and anecdotes about her friends. She reveals that "Lydia sometimes gets her stories mixed up with real life" (Page 110), claiming that Lydia scorns her parents but they aren't actually the melodramatically horrible parents Lydia pretends they are. Readers now have two impressions of Lydia's parents, one from Lydia's perspective and one from Cassie's, and can't be sure which is accurate. However, the novel often proves that the girls are more objective about each other than they are about themselves. Cassie admits Emily is "high strung," becoming overwrought when she can't get a pan perfectly clean (another indication of Emily's obsession with the surface of things). But Cassie doesn't truly reveal anything meaningful about herself to Matthew until he finally starts opening up. The one thing Cassie does mention is that she was too afraid to raise her hand to sing at the Spring Concert. The fact that she sometimes raises her hand when she's alone, shows how deeply this event affected her. Cassie is struggling to find her voice again after her father's death, which is a hurdle she will attempt to overcome by the end of the novel.

As with Lydia and Seb, it takes time before trust develops between the two teenagers. But readers should stay alert when Matthew gives one story about his parents' employment situation and then another, which Cassie questions. Though Matthew

smooths over the mistake (Page 117), readers may well wonder if he simply misspoke or if he is lying about something.



Chapters 13-15: Lydia's Notebook, Cassie's Diary, and Emily's Weekend

Chapters 13-15: Lydia's Notebook, Cassie's Diary, and Emily's Weekend Summary

Chapter 13: Lydia continues filling in her Notebook over the winter holidays at Emily's house, where she is staying while her parents are traveling for a convention. Still annoyed with the Notebook's patronizing questions, Lydia continues to make up fantastical stories. Lydia completes the Blue Danish Café assignment and meets Seb, who recognizes her first and disappears, as per the rules of the assignment. Emily gives Lydia details of her "date" with Charlie.

Chapter 14: Cassie arrives at Emily's house and although she won't tell her friends what's wrong, Cassie admits in the diary that Matthew never showed up for their meeting. She recounts once trying the yoga positions of her mother and grandmother. When she felt stuck they laughed at her - as she had feared - but her father simply untangled her.

Chapter 15: Emily's father writes a "statutory declaration" to Emily, describing his disappointment that Emily and her friends used his best wines in their cooking experiments. He is writing it out because a colleague informed him that rather than simply reacting to children's behavior, it is important to "express how one feels."

Chapters 13-15: Lydia's Notebook, Cassie's Diary, and Emily's Weekend Analysis

After the long chapters of correspondence between pairs of pen pals that happen simultaneously, the novel returns to shorter interludes that propel the plot forward in time. The three Autumn Term chapters end with cliffhangers, each girl on the cusp of meeting their Brookfield pen pal on the eve of the winter holiday. Chapter 13 resumes the action the next day, after the meetings have taken place. Once again Emily has no voice of her own, but readers can infer from her gushing, unending appraisal of Charlie through Lydia's Notebook that she has developed actual feelings for him. Lydia also finds Seb attractive, but has only seen him for three seconds and wonders how she recognized him. Matthew did not show up to meet Cassie, but it is significant that Cassie had neither told her friends that she had been intending to meet him, nor that she had been stood up. She continues to act secretly even though the reader knows how much it bothers Emily.

Cassie's "flashback" memory of her inept attempts at yoga and her father's gentle assistance is the first time Cassie speaks about her father at length. By describing his



kindness as opposed to her mother's mocking laughter, Cassie implies that she had a better, more understanding relationship with her father than her mother. If Cassie was indeed closer to her father than her mother, readers will understand why his death would be especially devastating to her.

Mr. Thompson's letter in Chapter 15 refers back to some incidents briefly mentioned by the girls in earlier chapters in which they casually used wine in their cooking experiments. Though the chapter does not move the plot forward, it highlights the relationship between Mr. Thompson and his daughter: his annoyance with her is gentle, and he does not actually punish her. He does not even argue with her when Emily suggests "if it's not okay, it's your fault" because he and his wife spend so much time away from home rather than supervising their children. Here, readers see further evidence that Emily is not used to being told she is wrong, nor of even being told what to do. Her parents' constant absence means she has learned to fend for herself, which may explain her authoritative tone in handling life.



Chapter 16-21: Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield

Chapter 16-21: Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield Summary

Chapter 16: Emily laments that Cassie is keeping secrets from her and Emily. She gives Charlie an A+ for their movie "date," only advising him to be funnier. Lydia thanks Seb for the sunflower he gave her when they met, but questions how he recognized her. Cassie casually wonders in her letter to Matthew why he didn't show up for their meeting.

Chapter 17: Charlie encourages Emily to be more critical in her assessment of their date, offering to evaluate her dating abilities as well. Seb sends Lydia a covert ops report about the success of their meeting and demands to know what happens next. Matthew is shocked to hear Cassie had been at their meeting point, because he claims he waited hours for her. He asks to reschedule.

Chapter 18: Emily, though willing to be harsher in her dating criticism of Charlie, wonders if he really wants to date Christina. She tells him Cassie might meet her Brookfield pen pal, so she requests information about Matthew, as well as Seb, on behalf of her friends. Lydia demands that Seb tell her how he recognized her, and she also asks for details on Matthew. Cassie takes the miscommunication with Matthew in stride and is willing to meet him again in the reserve.

Chapter 19: Charlie allays Emily's fears about Seb, claiming he is a good friend. But there is no Matthew Dunlop in his English class. Seb wants another assignment from Lydia involving a conversational meeting between them. He also claims there is no Matthew at Brookfield. Matthew sets a time for his next meeting with Cassie in the reserve.

Chapter 20: Emily worries that Cassie might be crazy and writing letters to an imaginary person. She asks Charlie to investigate any Matthew Dunlops at Brookfield while she and Lydia decide how to deal with Cassie's fragile state of mind. Lydia expresses the same fears to Seb, while Cassie accepts Matthew's new plan.



Chapter 21: Charlie says he and the school secretary, with whom he's friendly, found no records of a Matthew Dunlop. He requests another practice date with Emily to discuss the situation further. Seb pushes Lydia to let him get to the bottom of the confusion as well, reminding her that, "we figured out that we trusted each other last term" (Page 151). He also offers some deep insights into Cassie's state of mind, suggesting her strange behavior can be explained via that continued trauma of her father's death. Matthew writes one last letter before he and Cassie meet, telling her how special she is and how excited he is to finally meet her.

Chapter 16-21: Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield, Letters from Ashbury, Letters from Brookfield Analysis

Trust and secrets remain key issues between pairs of pen pals. Seb thinks he and Lydia have learned they can fully trust each other, but he evades her direct questions about how he identified her at the Blue Danish Café, proving that he still keeps secrets. Charlie still brings up "that chick who I will never forgive since she defrauded me into the belief that there was gas at my school" (Page 150). Charlie's inability to let this incident go acts as a bit of telegraphing for future events, as does Emily's explicit statement that, "It's [immoral], keeping a secret. I always tell everybody everything" (Page 136). Whether Emily was directly involved in the prank call or knows who was, she is not revealing it. By writing such unambiguous statements for these characters, Moriarty prepares readers for this situation to reach a climax.

Cassie continues to keep secrets as well. Matthew worries that her mother will no longer want to help him win back his trumpet rights because she thinks he stood up her daughter, but Cassie reassures him that she didn't tell her mother she was going to meet him. Cassie admits she doesn't think her mother would have let her go to the shadowy reserve to meet a strange boy. Readers can't be sure whether her secretive behavior is part of her reticent nature, but Emily and Lydia's reactions indicate she is not behaving like herself. Matthew's true character is questionable. His language is violent and accusatory over a simple misunderstanding. He says things like, "I went home with blue balls and I don't mean just from the cold" and, "My holiday kind of sucked the bag 'cause I was pissed off with you" (Page 140). Readers might note this continued tendency toward anger, and wonder if the real Matthew is closer to the rude, violence-prone boy of his first several letters rather than the sweet, open boy of later letters.

Finally, throughout the novel, readers have seen evidence that the girls know each other better than they know themselves. In Chapter 21, Moriarty introduces a new, contradictory idea: the girls know each other too well. They have been friends for so long it is sometimes impossible for them to step back and be objective about each other. Seb demonstrates this notion in regards to Lydia's fears about Cassie. When they discover there is no Matthew Dunlop at Brookfield, Lydia and Emily think Cassie has gone crazy and is writing to an imaginary person. Based on what Lydia has told him



about Cassie, Seb astutely surmises that Cassie is still haunted by the death of her father, and perhaps her loneliness is affecting her adversely, particularly if her pen pal didn't work out as well as Lydia's or Emily's. Lydia and Emily turn the problem melodramatic, whereas Seb grounds it back in the reality of Cassie's life.



Chapters 22-24: Lydia's Notebook, The Secret Assignment, Finding Matthew Dunlop

Chapters 22-24: Lydia's Notebook, The Secret Assignment, Finding Matthew Dunlop Summary

Chapter 22: Lydia describes the trepidation she and Emily feel as Cassie goes to meet Matthew. At the mall, they run into another classmate who asks about Cassie, who describes Cassie's strange solitary behavior in the reserve before the holiday. Processing this information, Lydia and Emily rush to the reserve and find Cassie crying alone in the rain. When they reveal that Matthew Dunlop doesn't exist, Cassie realizes her pen pal hadn't used his real name. All she will tell her friends is that he was not kind. Lydia blames herself for what happened to Cassie.

Chapter 23: Lydia gives the girls a secret assignment: to write down their greatest fears, to be kept and read in ten years. Emily has trouble digging deep, asserting her greatest fear is a chocolate allergy. She admits she's afraid Charlie doesn't like her because she's not pretty enough. Lydia's greatest fears are of losing her friends, particularly of Cassie slipping away. Cassie knows this assignment is a pretense to make her reveal what happened. She describes how a shadowy Matthew gushed sarcastically about loving her letters before abruptly mocking her, particularly about her tendency to raise her hand when alone. His first letters were accurate: he wanted her to stop writing. He throws her mother's letter to her father back at her, tells her he has a girlfriend, and that he never wants to hear another word from her "snooty, patronizing, private school voice" (Page 169).

Chapter 24: Having read Cassie's secret assignment, Lydia and Emily implore their respective pen pals to figure out the identity of the fake Matthew Dunlop. Seb and Charlie agree to help. They try various plans to smoke "Matthew" out, but nothing is successful. "Matthew" writes Cassie an arrogant letter, assuming she is obsessed with him. When Cassie wants the last word, she fills her letter with glitter which should stick to "Matthew" for days. Lydia receives a covert assignment report from Seb declaring a successful mission: after identifying a glittery suspect, he confirmed it by breaking into the culprit's locker. The offender's name is Paul Wilson, and he is Year 10 Captain and boyfriend of Christina, the girl of Charlie's dreams.



Chapters 22-24: Lydia's Notebook, The Secret Assignment, Finding Matthew Dunlop Analysis

In Chapter 23, as Emily tries to tease out her greatest fear, she thanks Lydia for this Significant Secret Assignment, saying, "It will hopefully lead to Cassie telling us what happened to her. I don't know how it will lead to that, I only know that Lydia's Secret Assignments always lead us in the right direction" (Page 161). Emily's words demonstrate Lydia's desire to control situations: she uses the secret assignments as a (benevolent) means of power. This desire for power is compounded by Emily and Cassie's willing acquiescence. Emily's words prove true because Cassie can only reveal what happened with "Matthew" through her secret assignment.

In Cassie's last letter to "Matthew" she finally admits that her dad died, and that ever since, she's been trying to stand up on her own rather than relying on her friends to carry her. Her letter is further proof of her attempt at bravery, given that it took her so many months to tell "Matthew" the truth. Even in her letters to a "perfect" stranger Cassie wanted to prove she was fine, and that her father's death was so insignificant she didn't even need to mention it anymore. It's important to note that the letter in Paul's locker was unopened, which means that Paul, or "Matthew," did not read it and still doesn't know about Cassie's devastating loss. This leaves readers to wonder if his subsequent behavior (or his earlier behavior, had Cassie revealed her father's death sooner) would be different had he known this key fact.

In Chapter 22, Moriarty offers another example of how the girls' deep-rooted friendship may adversely affect them: When a classmate corrects Emily's use of the word "omnivorous" Lydia admits, "Cass and I are never brave enough to correct Em's vocab mistakes" (Page 156). Their love for each other is so unconditional that they don't push each other to be better. Lydia and Cassie may have absorbed the idea that Emily is not particularly smart, and rather than examining this belief, they allow her to continue making mistakes in a self-fulfilling prophecy. It may further explain why they don't often take Emily's ideas seriously, and Lydia so easily takes control of the direction of their friendship.



Chapter 25: Winter Term/Emily and Charlie

Chapter 25: Winter Term/Emily and Charlie Summary

Emily recounts her shock at the identity of Matthew Dunlop. She thinks Charlie should get over Christina since she has bad taste in men, and offers to continue his dating training, which he gladly accepts. He claims Paul Wilson is a beloved brownnoser. Emily tells him Cassie does not want revenge but that she and Lydia are planning it anyway. These two loyal friends are further enraged with Bindy MacKenzie, who mistakenly told Cassie that Matthew played the trumpet. When Charlie stops by Ashbury to practice "meeting a girl by chance," he hears the school's announcements which activate his "supersonic" memory. He recognizes them as the announcements in the background of the gas leak phone call. He suspects the prankster called from Ashbury and requests Emily help him track her down. Emily unilaterally decides Bindy Mackenzie is the "type" to make a prank call. She promises to snub Bindy on Charlie's behalf and he can finally forget the gas leak prank. Charlie doesn't buy the non-logic of Emily's argument about Bindy.

Emily tells Charlie Lydia's revenge plan is to take away what Paul loves most: Christina. For the plan to work, Charlie must begin pursuing Christina immediately, but Charlie isn't sure he wants to anymore. Emily pushes him to get it over with in order to humiliate Paul and avenge Cassie. Though Charlie accuses her of being a person of "extremes and hyperbole" (Page 200), he presses Emily to go out again.

When Charlie tries to put things in perspective after Emily fails a test, Emily comes out and tells Charlie that her greatest fear is that she "won't be able to become a lawyer or any other profession because I'm not smart enough" (Page 204). She further reveals that Lydia is the secret assignment assignor. Charlie asks to meet up to talk everything over. Emily, who takes the secret assignments very seriously, kicks herself for telling him about Lydia, but explains that Lydia has used the secret assignments as a way of solving the girls' problems since grade school. She refuses to meet Charlie, so that she won't miss him when he starts dating Christina. When Charlie asks about some of her more criminal secret assignments, Emily tells him Lydia had Cassie break into one of his teacher's cars to get Seb out of an exam. Charlie reveals he and Seb became friends when he helped Seb track down a picture of Lydia after her first letter, in a Woman's Day magazine article about her famous mother. The picture had confirmed that Lydia is gorgeous. Charlie gives Emily clues about who he likes, including that she has a cute way of pronouncing "th" (keen readers will remember Charlie claimed the gas leak prankster had a distinctive "th" pronunciation). Emily admits she also knew what Charlie looked like before they met because he is in a picture Seb sent Lydia as a clue for their meeting assignment.



Emily inexplicably cancels the revenge plan: She tells Charlie that he no longer needs to ask out Christina, and that Emily would like to go on another date with him instead. But Charlie's memory has clicked: he matches Emily and the prankster's "th" pronunciation, and all cancelled exams. Emily finally admits she made the prank call. She asks Charlie to forgive her and let it go, but Charlie asks Emily to leave him alone. Emily tries to smooth things over but gets defensive and negative about Charlie, mocking his supersonic memory. She claims she didn't do anything illegal, but Charlie's cop brother gives him evidence that falsely claiming lives or property are in danger is a punishable offense. They stop speaking.

Chapter 25: Winter Term/Emily and Charlie Analysis

Emily's vocabulary errors have peppered every letter, and in this chapter Charlie finally corrects a word Emily uses incorrectly. When he corrects her more than once, Emily gets annoyed, claiming words should mean how they "feel." Again readers see that Emily is unused to being corrected, and that she has always been given the latitude to do as she pleases. She seems to think any correction is an indictment against her entire identity. She chastises Charlie, saying, "It is as if you don't want me to be ME" (Page 198). Despite her distaste for secrets and her absolute faith in her best friends, readers learn that Emily cannot bring herself to admit her greatest fear to her friends, though she reluctantly tells Charlie she fears she isn't smart enough to become a lawyer. This admission may account for her constant misuse of impressive vocabulary, as well as her decisive way of bossing Charlie around: she wants to sound smarter than she feels. Because Lydia and Cassie's opinions matter to her most of all, she wants them to believe she is smart, and does not want to show the weakness that admitting the fear would imply.

Emily recounts a story in which Cassie's mother Patricia, makes the girls think about the "truth" of a TV dinner commercial from a variety of perspectives. The girls immediately see the commercial as sexist, but Patricia pushes them to think about it from a Socialist point of view, or a Christian, or an advertising executive's. She reminds them that there are many truths in the world and that they should look for as many as possible. However, when Emily tries to analyze one of Charlie's letters as Patricia suggests, she merely runs through a variety of perspectives that prove his letter is stupid. Emily has trouble engaging with the world from different perspectives. As readers have seen throughout the novel, she has an absolute view of truth, exemplified by the multitude of "inarguable" declarative statements she makes.

Emily expresses an unjustified hatred for Bindy MacKenzie because she mistakenly misled Cassie about "Matthew," as well as a variety of other superficial reasons she offers (e.g. her high-pitched voice or her irritatingly arrogant way of speed typing). Emily says Bindy always comes first in English but keen readers will remember that Emily wants to come first in English. It becomes clear that Emily's hatred of Bindy is rooted in jealousy. It is also interesting to note that on Page 202, Emily claims, "It's okay to hurt yourself in little ways. For example, it's okay to scrape your knuckles on a brick wall and make yourself bleed a bit." Readers may well wonder if Emily hurts herself physically on



a regular basis. Given how much time the girls spend divulging information about each other, neither Lydia nor Cassie ever mentions Emily has a masochistic streak. Emily herself isn't admitting to doing it, only that she thinks it is acceptable behavior. If Emily engages in this behavior it is her most guarded secret, and she is a person who doesn't believe in secrets. Though Emily is a person who speaks in absolutes, she often bends her strong beliefs into a relativist pretzel when it comes to her own behavior. She makes up rules that don't apply to herself.



Chapter 26: Winter Term/Lydia and Seb

Chapter 26: Winter Term/Lydia and Seb Summary

Lydia wants more information from Seb about Paul so she can plan her revenge. Seb summarizes Paul as good looking, well-liked, and an actor who dreams of fame. Lydia reveals her plan to steal Christina from Paul, asking Seb if he thinks Charlie can do it. He tells her Charlie has a legendary status he doesn't even realize because he used to steal teachers' cars during school and tune them up. Lydia also wonders if Seb cheated to identify her at the Blue Danish Café. He is insulted that she would think so little of him. Seb wants to be an artist, and mentions that one of his paintings will be in a school district competition. Seb gives Lydia an elaborate "covert" assignment to meet him at the movies. Their letters reveal that this mission, completed almost entirely in silence, went well. After their next "covert assignment," Seb admits he's ready to "stop playing games and start being humans" (Page 225). He invites Lydia to meet his mom and baby brother, but Lydia likes their secret missions and nonverbal meetings. She likes playing these games.

When Cassie tells Lydia why she kept writing to "Matthew," Lydia only wants to destroy him more. Seb used to get in trouble for fighting, and now he wants to beat up Paul, but he's gotten his temper under control recently through Tae-Kwon-Do. He notices that Lydia likes to feel powerful, so he suggests she find something that makes her feel in control but also good. In response, Lydia writes Seb a dark letter, admitting she thinks the world is dark at its core, like the rotten potatoes she peels. She fears darkness is enveloping her and her friends: Emily might not be smart enough to be a lawyer, Cassie is too scared to be a singer, and getting published is a matter of luck that Lydia can't control. Lydia told Emily not to worry about a bad test grade, but Lydia wonders "how long you can keep lying for" (Page 233). Seb offers to show her the good in the world, and Lydia appreciates Seb's kindness.

Meanwhile Emily acts gloomily until she finally admits she wants to date Charlie herself. Cassie cancels the revenge plan: she does not want Charlie to steal Christina at Emily's expense. Seb thinks Charlie likes Emily too, and pushes Lydia to give up on revenge. He thinks Lydia should put the Paul Wilson incident in perspective, and not hurt herself or her friends over it.

Lydia invites Seb on a covert mission to accompany her to the beach, which Seb classifies as a "failure" when they end up kissing. He wants to stop making up assignments to see Lydia and just hang out with her. Lydia isn't sure she wants a boyfriend, because when dating she feels like she disappears: "I always feel like it's just physical and like they near really hear me when I speak" (Page 243). She wants them to continue writing letters so she can stay true to herself. But Seb wonders if she is really herself in her letters. In her next letter, Lydia exposes Seb as a liar; Charlie has told Emily about the magazine photo, and Emily has revealed the truth to Lydia. Lydia believes Seb cares more about what a girl looks like than what she says. Seb swears



everything else he's told her is true. Each accuses the other of playing games and being untrustworthy, but Seb finally apologizes and promises to write long letters. Despite this, Lydia can't forgive him.

Chapter 26: Winter Term/Lydia and Seb Analysis

Readers see the depths of Lydia's fears in this chapter, particularly in her letter to Seb comparing the evil inherent in the world to a rotten potato. She claims, "Nothing good is ever going to happen, and anybody who says it is, is lying to you" (Page 233). She has a bleak outlook for the futures of her friends and herself. When she admits to Seb that she wishes she had a tragedy in her past to better help Cassie navigate the loss of her father, it seems she believes it would be a relief to have already experienced something terrible rather than to live in constant fear of the inevitable tragedy that will befall her. She lacks the perspective that experiencing a true tragedy would engender. Without understanding what Cassie is feeling, she can't control the situation and force Cassie to be better somehow. Instead, she uses the secret assignments to try to control situations and subdue her own fear. Seb recognizes Lydia's lack of perspective and counters it by recounting the worst thing that's ever happened to him: almost getting expelled and disappointing his loving mother. Seb, who has used soccer imagery and metaphors throughout the book, describes how his mom used a soccer metaphor to make him see how self-defeating getting into trouble is: she equates it to losing the ball right before a team gets to the goal. By putting her concerns into language he could relate to, Seb's mother put things in perspective for him. Unfortunately, Seb's tendency toward lying, demonstrated earlier in the novel (by refusing to admit his covert missions were intended to get him out of class) manifests itself more negatively in this chapter and Seb must suffer the consequences. The trust Seb and Lydia have worked to build over the months of letter writing comes crashing down, and the only way for Lydia to have power in the situation is to cut Seb out of her life.

Also, in this chapter, Emily's mother offers a differing perspective on truth than the girls get from Cassie's mother. She believes there are certain truths that are absolute. For example, it is never okay to harm oneself or anyone else. Emily argues with her mother, saying sometimes it is okay to hurt oneself in order to save a friend from hurting more. This reinforces Emily's early declaration that it's acceptable to do bodily harm to oneself, as long as it's small pain. Now she is referring to an emotional pain, but she seems to sincerely believe in martyrdom and masochism. The fact that Emily posits a different belief than her mother on this is ironic, because Emily appears throughout the novel to believe in strict absolutes. She sees things in black-and-white and makes bold statements that don't brook argument. Even her belief about self-inflicted pain is an absolute in Emily's eyes, because loyalty is an absolute for her.



Chapter 27: Winter Term/Cassie

Chapter 27: Winter Term/Cassie Summary

Cassie writes in her diary in earnest now that the letters from Matthew have stopped. She hates herself for lying to Lydia and Emily, blaming herself for the Matthew Dunlop incident because she kept writing to him even after his first threatening letters. When Cassie finally admits this to Lydia, Cassie is fearful Lydia must think she's crazy. Lydia sets a secret assignment for herself and Emily to assure Cassie she is sane. Emily theorizes that Cassie wrote Matthew because his cruelty hurt her in a way she could handle better than the pain of losing her father; it was a distraction from the sadness still heavy in her heart. Lydia believes Cassie continued writing the letters as a way of taking the power from her bossy counselor, whom she knows is a charlatan. Cassie believes she wrote to Matthew because she was afraid of him and had promised her father she would never be afraid of anything. He believed he may have gotten cancer because he was healthy but anxious. When Cassie was too afraid to volunteer for the spring concert she felt she had let her father down. Thus no matter how scary Matthew got, she kept writing to prove she was brave.

While visiting Mrs. Jackson's production studio for makeovers, Lydia's mom advises them to stay attuned to their own personal truth by constantly questioning what they are thinking or feeling. Cassie tests this theory, asking herself why she's angry. She boils it down to a fear that she inherited her father's trepidation, and that he would never have a reason to be proud of her. She admits to Lydia why she kept writing to Matthew, and Lydia gets angry at her, believing Cassie is misremembering her own father. She knows Mr. Aganovic would never want Cassie to do anything that might get her hurt, and he'd be proud she even considered singing on stage. Cassie gets an odd letter from Paul Wilson, who claims never to have written to her after receiving her first letter in the fall. He tells her he had been beaten up by Seb Mantegna, on her (Cassie's) behalf. He's going to make Seb miss his art competition and get him expelled first thing in the morning.

Chapter 27: Winter Term/Cassie Analysis

Cassie's diary entries continue to reveal more about Emily and Lydia than they do about her own feelings. For example, Cassie recounts an incident where Emily admonishes Lydia for writing a story and killing all the characters at the end. Emily wants her to rewrite the story so the characters live happily ever after, and even if there are obstacles to their happiness, Lydia should keep writing until she stumbles upon a happy ending. This illustrates the marked contrast between Emily's and Lydia's worldview: Emily, an optimist, hates conflict and sadness, and Lydia, a pessimist, cannot help but end her stories with death and destruction (this resonates with her admission to Seb in Chapter 26 that she believes the world is like a rotting potato, bad at its core.) Cassie, on the



other hand, doesn't state a preference for happy or sad endings, being too immersed in trying to find happiness in the face of the real tragedy of her father's death.

Similarly, Emily and Lydia's explanations for why Cassie isn't crazy reveal much more about themselves than about Cassie. Emily thinks Cassie tried to hurt herself through her correspondence with Matthew in order to avoid the greater pain of her father's death, which parallels Emily's belief that it's okay to hurt oneself in little ways, mentioned in Chapter 25. Lydia thinks Cassie is trying to take the power from her counselor by actually following her counselor's advice, because Lydia herself constantly tries to control situations and take the power away from others (for example, she accepts Seb's initial challenge to show she isn't scared of him and that he has no power over her. Seb himself astutely points out Lydia's desire for power through her need to take revenge on Paul Wilson). Neither friend can truly see why Cassie might have behaved as she did. They can only interpret her actions through the lens of their own feelings and desires.

Also in this chapter, Cassie gets angry at Claire for using the word "lost" to describe the death of her father. Claire's vocabulary choice implies her father could be found, or could have been had they worked hard enough to find a cure for him. Cassie feels crazy because she forgets things, and because she wrote to "Matthew" even though he was cruel to her. But she knows these behaviors are just symptoms of her sadness. She says, "it's a lot easier to be crazy or mad than to just get on with living" (Page 253). In each of the last three chapters, each girl has admitted their true greatest fear, which they couldn't articulate in Lydia's secret assignment. Cassie's greatest fear is being a disappointment to her father by letting her own fears rule her. Though Cassie claims to believe talking is better than writing, she has been keeping all her fears buried inside her rather than opening up to her mother, her counselor, her friends, or even "Matthew." She has her own internal climactic moment when Lydia allays her fear that she has failed her father. By verbalizing her fear to Lydia, she allows Lydia, who knew her father almost as well as she did, to step in and act as a surrogate parent, reminding her how proud her father would be of everything she has accomplished.



Chapter 28-31: Saving Seb Mantegna, The Battle, Transcript of Proceedings Typed by Bindy MacKenzie, Ashbury High School Year 10 Notice Board

Chapter 28-31: Saving Seb Mantegna, The Battle, Transcript of Proceedings Typed by Bindy MacKenzie, Ashbury High School Year 10 Notice Board Summary

The girls chance upon an opportunity to revenge themselves against Paul Wilson, but experience a reversal of fortune when they are accused of pulling pranks at Brookfield that could lead to getting them expelled from school.

Chapter 28: Emily writes Charlie a hurried letter begging for forgiveness and claiming she and the girls have kidnapped Paul Wilson. Impressed, Charlie absolves her. Though grateful for Seb's loyalty, Lydia doesn't want Seb in trouble, and she writes to tell him that they are keeping Paul distracted for the day. Knowing Paul wants to be an actor, the girls concoct a plan to make him believe a casting director is desperate to have him fill in immediately for an ailing film actor. Being an egomaniac, Paul doesn't question the strange circumstances and shows up at Lydia's mother's production studio as directed. The girls then send him on a wild goose chase to find the shooting location. They finally get their revenge by taking away what Paul loved the most: the "idea of himself" (Page 275). Lydia also tells Seb she may have overreacted to his deception, but she wonders if she can trust him to like who she really is. In response, Seb is thrilled to hear from Lydia again, and more thrilled with the news that he won his art show. His award winning painting is based on a story Lydia told him, so clearly her words have gotten to him. Seb also admits to beating up Paul after Paul told the story of how he treated Cassie as if it were a funny anecdote, and Seb lost his temper. Seb feels triumphant that Paul has not gone to the principal.

Chapter 29: An announcement on the notice board cancels the pen pal project due to a series of escalating pranks between the schools. The Ashbury girls communicate with the Brookfield boys via email to keep abreast of developments. The schools call a joint meeting at Ashbury for teachers and parents to discuss the crimes. The girls are shocked when their headmistress, Mrs. Lilydale, fingers them as the vandals. She claims an eyewitness saw them at Brookfield. Though they have pulled their share of pranks, the girls were not involved in the vandalism against Brookfield but they have no alibi because they were cutting school at the time. Mrs. Lilydale retrieves paperwork from their lockers (Lydia's Notebook, Cassie's diary, Emily's letters) to find proof of their misconduct, but the girls deny the school's right to read their private things. Cassie's mother and Emily's father arrive wielding threatening legal language. They propose a



hearing before the school-wide meeting to settle the privacy issue, and Mrs. Aganovic appoints Emily to represent the girls' case at the hearing. Seb believes Paul might be taking revenge against the girls, and asks Lydia to set him up with her lock picking friend to help him investigate. Lydia doesn't think Emily can effectively make their case and she blames herself for potentially ruining her friends' lives.

Chapter 30: Bindy MacKenzie, Emily's pseudo-nemesis, types verbatim the text of the privacy hearing. The judges are the Brookfield deputy principal, Judge Anderson, and the Ashbury headmistress, Judge Koutchavalis. Cassie is mysteriously missing from the hearing. Mr. Thompson sits in to ensure things go smoothly from a "legal" perspective. Mrs. Lilydale makes the case for reading the girls' papers in order to determine their guilt. In her opinion, their privacy comes second to the safety of both schools. Emily cross-examines Mrs. Lilydale efficiently, questioning why she is protecting the privacy of the unnamed Brookfield witness but not of the Ashbury girls. Emily slams Mrs. Lilydale with the legal code Charlie used against her for falsely inciting panic when Mrs. Lilydale referred to the spray-painted vandalism as "grave danger." Emily concludes with an impassioned argument that teenagers struggle with their identities, and they often write things down to clarify who they are and how they feel. She claims that if teachers read their private papers, they will take "the fragile pieces of paper which decide who we are going to be - and you'll be tearing them to shreds" (Page 312). She cites legal cases for teen privacy, Mr. Botherit's promise of confidentiality, and the UN's articles on the rights of children. Everyone is stunned by Emily's performance, and the judges decide in the girls' favor regarding their privacy, but they are still in trouble for allegedly committing the crimes. Suddenly Cassie, Seb, and Charlie show up (in the Rattlesnake's stolen car) with evidence taken from Paul Wilson's bedroom that he perpetrated the vandalism against Brookfield himself. The judges are confused, since Paul is the key eyewitness against the girls. Paul tries to defend himself, claiming Seb and Charlie are notorious troublemakers, and that Cassie may be a pathological liar. Bindy steps in to say Cassie's father died last year and Paul should be kind to her. This silences Paul. Guilty, he cannot defend himself and runs away. The girls are vindicated.

Chapter 31: Ashbury High School Year 10 Notice Board proclaims Mr. Botherit's pen pal program has been reinstated. To solidify the unity between the schools, the spring concert will now be a joint effort, and each pair of pen pals must participate together.

Chapter 28-31: Saving Seb Mantegna, The Battle, Transcript of Proceedings Typed by Bindy MacKenzie, Ashbury High School Year 10 Notice Board Analysis

The discovery of Matthew Dunlop's true identity acts as a sort of false climax of the book, and the denouement unravels as the girls seek revenge. But Paul's double revenge - first against Seb and then against the girls through the false vandalism charges acts as an unexpected reversal of fortune which leads to another climax.



A number of elements from earlier in the novel conveniently dovetail as the story reaches a climax: Emily's defense of the girls' privacy includes the legal code Charlie gave her about false endangerment as well as the material Cassie gathered for "Matthew" on the rights of the child, and Mr. Botherit's own notice that the letters between students would be confidential. Cassie's lock picking skills and Charlie's car stealing re-emerge to save the day in a dramatic last minute reversal. Bindy MacKenzie, whom Emily mocks jealously for being an outstanding typist, records the proceedings a little too accurately. Emily, fearful that she is not smart enough to become a lawyer, is put in a situation where she must directly face this fear. Cassie uses a skill she learned from her father (she helped him put locks into secret compartments in the furniture he built) to get the evidence necessary to prove they didn't commit the vandalism. And Lydia, with her intense desire to control situations, sits passively while Emily and Cassie save them from expulsion.

When Charlie announces the administration thinks the Ashbury vandals had help from inside Brookfield because the school was not physically broken into but someone was "doing music or drama practice there over the weekend" (Page 286), keen readers will remember that Paul Wilson is in the drama club. One prank involves looping the Ashbury anthem with different backing tracks to play over the Brookfield PA, but there is no evidence connecting Paul to this prank. Emily's vigorous claims to innocence, predicated on an ignorance of audio looping software when she says, "It would need to be someone with audio looping software, wouldn't it? And what is audio looping software?" (Page 287) may actually be a none-too-subtle wink to the reader (both of the novel and of her email, i.e., Seb and Charlie) that the girls had in fact been involved in this prank.



Chapters 32-37: Emily and Charlie, Lydia and Seb, Lydia's Notebook, Emily's Weekend, Cassie's Diary, Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board

Chapters 32-37: Emily and Charlie, Lydia and Seb, Lydia's Notebook, Emily's Weekend, Cassie's Diary, Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board Summary

Chapter 32: Emily celebrates her courtroom victory and tells Charlie that the legal studies teacher recruited her for the class despite her grades. Thrilled that Cassie will sing at the next upcoming school concert, Emily doesn't know how Cassie is getting around working with her Brookfield partner, as per the concert's rules. Worried because her father hasn't given her feedback for her legal performance, she assumes she had been subpar. In Chapter 35, her father gives her a subpoena to go horseback riding, which proves that he is proud of her. In her joy, Emily finally asks Charlie out and he agrees. Charlie is relieved the Rattlesnake will not press charges for stealing his car, as long as Charlie gives him free tune-ups. He tells Emily that Paul's parents withdrew him from the school.

Chapter 33: Lydia agrees to date Seb as long as she doesn't forget her identity. Seb is impressed with Cassie's lock picking skills, and believes that combined with her singing, she'll have boys falling at her feet. He promises that if Lydia begins to lose her personality, he'll notify her. He tells her he has a good idea for their contribution to the concert rather than selling tickets.

Chapter 34: Lydia completes the assignments in her Notebook in her own unique way. She realizes she has been hiding behind words, thinking they can solve her problems. She recognizes that she spends her time expecting the worst case scenarios for herself and her friends and hating her parents rather than looking at reality and admitting things aren't so bad. She decides to take a break from writing to spend time with the people she cares about.

Chapter 36: Cassie and her mother decide to stop seeing the counselor, and Cassie admits she is jealous that her mother got to write a letter to her father. Cassie wonders why Claire wanted her to tell a stranger about herself rather than Emily and Lydia. Cassie's mother believes Cassie changed after her father died, but that Cassie doesn't know how to be her new self around her best friends, who had known the old her so well. In her opinion, talking to a stranger had been a chance to try out her new self.



Chapter 37: On the Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board, there is an announcement that Lydia and Seb have written and illustrated a children's book together as their contribution to the concert. Cassie incorporated "Matthew Dunlop" into her performance for the concert by using one of his nicer letters as lyrics for her song. Emily, Lydia, and Cassie post a notice selling audio looping software, only used once.

Chapters 32-37: Emily and Charlie, Lydia and Seb, Lydia's Notebook, Emily's Weekend, Cassie's Diary, Ashbury High Year 10 Notice Board Analysis

Cassie has finally made some peace with her father's death and how it has changed her forever. She is ready to integrate the loss into her new sense of herself. Cassie admits she had been jealous that her mother had gotten to write her father a letter in counseling, so readers may rightfully assume that when Cassie writes in her diary, "I'm dedicating the song to my dad...But you know that I'll mean it for you. And I'll write the words out for you here" (Page 337) she is now using the diary as a means to communicate with her father and keep him present in her life. Throughout the novel, Cassie has been searching for a way to move forward without leaving her dad behind, and she seems to have found it.

Seb proves how much Lydia's words, more than her looks, mean to him by suggesting they write and illustrate a book together. She has spent so much time worrying about whether she will ever be a published author, and Seb shows her that she can take control (in a positive way) and have the power to do it for herself rather than waiting for other people. Lydia hasn't changed too much despite everything, since her story is still too gory and death-oriented for children. Emily finally gets to see her horses, which she has longed for over the course of the novel. The horses symbolize the attention and approval of her oft-absent parents, who finally articulate their pride in her performance at the hearing. Finally, readers' suspicions about the Ashbury girls' involvement with the looping anthem on Brookfield's P.A. are confirmed when they post a notice selling audio looping equipment. Despite all the pranks they have pulled throughout the year, the girls manage to completely avoid trouble. They are the only students to evade consequences for their actions; all the Brookfield boys get in some degree of trouble for their actions. For better or worse, Ashbury's stellar reputation, reflected on its students, has given the girls a "get out of jail free" card.



Characters

Lydia Jaackson-Oberman

Lydia Jaackson-Oberman is one of the three tenth grade protagonists of the novel. Lydia immediately demonstrates her independent streak in the first chapter when she fails to follow the instructions laid out in her Notebook. Lydia loves words and wants to be a professional author, but has a problem finishing any of the writing projects she starts. As the assigner of "secret assignments," Lydia is the ringleader of the girls, which is why Mr. Thompson, Emily's father teasingly refers to her as "nothing but trouble" (Page 9). Her rebellious nature means she embraces challenges, unflinchingly accepting Sebastian's missions to wreak serious havoc at his school. But she has a sensitive side and remains attuned to what Cassie needs as she continues to grieve the loss of her father, pushing Cassie to open up about her internal struggle. Many of her recent assignments are based on facilitating Cassie's healing, taking her mind off her troubles via escapism (cutting school to see movies) and adrenaline rushes (shoplifting), or by forcing her to confront them through cathartic articulation (writing down her greatest fears). Though Lydia behaves fearlessly through these assignments, her bold behavior covers an undercurrent of fear - fear of losing her friends, fear of failure, and fear of losing her grip on herself. She doesn't want to date Sebastian because dating has made her act differently in the past. She fears relationships with boys that are "just physical and like they never really hear me when I speak" (Page 243). This reinforces how important words are to Lydia. Deep down she sees the world as a terrible place, where "nothing good is ever going to happen, and anyone who says it is, is lying to you" (Page 233). By slowly learning to trust Sebastian and forgive his mistakes, and recognizing Cassie's resilience, Lydia starts to shift her perspective on life. She decides to stop "hiding behind this idea that everything is dark and terrible" (Page 331). Since she believes words have power, her decision to give up writing for a while represents her attempt to relinquish control and simply experience life as it comes.

Emily Thompson

Emily Thompson is the second tenth grade protagonist of the novel. Emily comes across as a stereotypical superficial teenage girl, using exclamation points and smiley faces in her writing and gushing about shopping and chocolate. When Lydia kills all the characters in a story she writes, Emily suggests that instead the characters "get married and move to a mansion by the sea" (Page 252). She wants everyone to have a "happily ever after." Emily is superficial in another sense, being concerned with external things. She is afraid of the dark and worries about her friends' physicality, giving her mittens to Lydia on a cold day when Lydia writes outside. She also expresses her emotions physically, stamping her feet when she is upset, or "to stamp herself back into herself" (Page 226). Readers can rightfully question if Emily deals with her emotional pain by externalizing it when she writes to Charlie that she thinks it is "okay to hurt yourself in little ways. For example, it's okay to scrape your knuckles on a brick wall and make



yourself bleed a bit" (Page 202). She hates secrets (again, she wants everything to be on the outside, even knowledge) and thus it makes sense that she is the one to reveal the genesis and evolution of the secret assignments. Despite this outward focus, Emily has a deeply internalized fear of being too unintelligent to manifest her dream of becoming a lawyer. She overcompensates for her perceived lack of brains by being bossy and using big words, often incorrectly. She seems to believe that by acting authoritative, no one will notice her intellectual insecurity. She often makes completely arbitrary claims as if they are known facts, and thus does not have to back them up with evidence. Knowing her quirks and loving her unconditionally, Lydia and Cassie tolerate her false bravado, and Charlie is the first person to call her out on being wrong, sometimes directly (i.e., the way she misuses words) and sometimes turning her proclamations against her by enacting them. For example, in Chapter 10, she claims he should change his name to something that begins with "A" - a completely arbitrary and inexplicable rule. When he starts signing all his letters with different, silly "A" names, she is forced to admit "I WAS COMPLETELY WRONG" (Page 70). By acting as lawyer during the privacy hearing, Emily must rely on evidence to win the case. For the first time she recognizes she isn't as dumb as she secretly fears, and that she has the resources to build a strong case for her beliefs.

Cassie Agonovic

Cassie Aganovic is the third member of the female protagonist trio. Also in tenth grade, Cassie is more musical and athletic than her friends. She has a strange gift for picking locks. She is quieter than Lydia and Emily, and until her father's death the previous year, less introspective. This may be why she claims "not to be the kind of person who writes in diaries" (Page 12). Yet suddenly she seeks the diary as an outlet to deal with her overwhelming emotions. Near the end of the book, Cassie admits she is jealous her mother had gotten to write her father a letter in counseling, and readers know the diary is a gift from her father. Thus the diary has become a surrogate for her father, a way to stay close to and communicate with him. Cassie has a harder time relating to her friends since her father's death, desiring to seem fine and strong although she still actively grieves his loss. Because her father had a skewed theory that he got cancer because he spent his life being fearful, Cassie believes she needs to act more bravely. Consequently she is more susceptible to disappointment in herself when she fails to live up to her new, high standards. She writes to "Matthew Dunlop" to stand up to her fear of him, and is full of self-loathing for failing to volunteer to sing at the spring concert. She struggles to come to terms with the ways she has inevitably changed following the loss of her father, but by the end of the book, she has started to accept her "new self" and taken small steps toward embracing her bravery by singing in the spring concert.

Sebastian Mantegna / Seb

Sebastian Mantegna / Seb is Lydia's pen pal at Brookfield High School. He is passionate about both art and soccer. Though he fits the typical Brookfield mold as a troublemaking student always on the verge of being expelled (he has a habit of beating



up fellow students), readers see the superficiality of his tough exterior. Out of respect for his worried mother, Seb learns to channel his anger into Tae Kwon Do. He is an attentive sibling to his infant brother. His relationship with Lydia builds gradually as they learn to trust each other, and they are temperamentally well-matched for swapping risky "missions." Though he lies to Lydia about knowing what she looks like before they meet, and Lydia fears he only likes her because of her appearance, Sebastian proves his loyalty to her by gladly helping to track down the true identity of Matthew Dunlop, beating him up because of his behavior toward Cassie, and breaking into his house to find evidence to keep Lydia and her friends out of trouble. Though he makes mistakes, his heart is generally in the right place and he proves Brookfield kids are more than their reputation allows.

Charlie Taylor

Charlie Taylor has a reputation for troublemaking although he is actually a kind, complex person. He comes from a troubled home, an overcrowded house full of bickering family, and though he wants to be a good student, he doesn't have the resources to study effectively. He is a good match for Emily because he calls her out on her arbitrary rules. Emily thinks everyone should be "completely themselves," and Charlie is just that. He doesn't tolerate drama. He is justifiably hurt to learn Emily placed the gas leak prank call that caused him so much humiliation. Although he has gotten into trouble for stealing teachers' cars, he tunes them up before returning them, proving a lack of malicious intent. He is quick to prove his loyalty by helping discover Paul Wilson and getting the girls off the hook for the Brookfield pranks.

Paul Wilson / Matthew Dunlop

Paul Wilson / Matthew Dunlop, is the Brookfield student to whom Cassie writes letters. He is the antagonist of the story, and is an unredeemable villain. Ironically, Paul is a Brookfield anomaly: the upstanding student, Year 10 Captain, and star of the school play. But in reality he has an intentionally cruel, troublemaking streak. Although his identity as Matthew Dunlop is entirely fictional (i.e., playing the trumpet, wanting to be a pilot), readers might wonder if his story about dating an Ashbury girl who betrayed him might be true: he seems to have a deep-rooted hatred of the women of Ashbury. From his first letter when he writes, "Eat shit and die, private school slag" (Page 26) to his face-to-face meeting with Cassie when he mocks her "snooty, patronizing, private school voice" (Page 169), Paul seems embittered toward women. His hubris results in his undoing: Lydia, "that Em and I spent all that time trying to take away the thing that Paul Wilson loved the most. Which we thought must be his girlfriend. Whereas Cass figured out exactly what he loved the most: Himself" (Page 275). If Paul thinks so highly of himself, his hatred of Ashbury may stem from jealousy. He believes he deserves all the best opportunities in life, and Ashbury clearly has a better reputation than Brookfield.



Benjamin A Thompson

Benjamin A. Thompson is Emily's father, and he represents the sole adult voice readers hear directly. In his letters to Emily, written in the style of legal documents, he reveals a warmth and humor toward his daughter, indicating that she comes from a loving and stable home. His letters also demonstrate he and his wife are often away from home, which may explain Emily's pseudo-authoritativeness, since she has often had to take care of herself in their absence.

Mr. Botherit

Mr. Botherit is the Ashbury English teacher who initiates the pen pal project with Brookfield. Though he hopes his students will find a renewed appreciation for the written word as well as broaden their perspective by engaging with students from a different background, he perpetuates the stereotypes about Brookfield students by referring to them as "scary" and implying that they are different from Ashbury students because they all have tattoos and criminal records.

Claire

Claire is the counselor Cassie and her mother see to deal with their grief over the death of Mr. Aganovic. From the first session, Cassie suspects the usefulness of Claire's techniques, which seem too self-congratulatory to Cassie and her mother. Besides assigning Cassie to tell a stranger about herself, she plays recorded applause and cheering for the Aganovic women and offers them decorating therapy, making Christmas trees in October. By the end of the book Cassie and her mom decide they don't need Claire's "help" anymore.

Patricia

Patricia is Cassie's mother, a lawyer. While she is grieving the loss of her husband, she finds herself unable to communicate directly with her daughter about their loss, choosing instead to seek a counselor's assistance to deal with her pain. However, Patricia shows a marked disdain for Claire's methods from their first session, and spends many sessions evading Claire's questions. Patricia is the first parent to challenge the way the girls see their world, using a commercial for a TV dinner to push them to broaden their definition of truth by looking at it from a variety of perspectives.

Mr. Aganovic

Mr. Aganovic is Cassie's father, who died of leukemia a year before the novel begins. He was good friends with both Lydia's and Emily's parents. Cassie was especially close with her father, who treated her feelings more respectfully than her mother. A lawyer by



trade, he also built furniture, providing an opportunity to bond further with Cassie as she assisted him in installing locks. Though not a living character in the book, his presence is pervasive throughout the story, recalled in vivid memories by not only Cassie but also Lydia and Emily.

Marianne Jaackson

Marianne Jaackson is Lydia's mother. She is a former soap opera star, who now owns a production studio. Her fame helps Sebastian access pictures of Lydia before he meets her. Unlike Patricia, Marianne advises the girls to seek the truth in their hearts. Lydia has a slightly antagonistic relationship with her mother, but finally admits her mom is merely a little flaky.

Judge Jaackson

Judge Jaackson is Lydia's father. He is a Supreme Court judge. Lydia resents him for his flirty behavior with women other than her mother, as well as for forgetting her birthday. Though he showers her with whatever she wants (when she mentions she wants to paint her room, he hires painters to take care of it immediately, and he buys her a computer to compensate for forgetting the birthday), Lydia acts like she hates him.

Bindy MacKenzie

Bindy MacKenzie is a fellow Ashbury student who mistakenly misidentifies Matthew Dunlop as a trumpet player to Cassie. She gets the best grades in English, much to Emily's chagrin, since Emily is desperate to come first in the subject. Emily's resentment boils over irrationally, and she downplays all of Bindy's talents including her exceptional typing skills. Bindy types verbatim the transcript for the preliminary hearing on the girls' right to privacy.



Objects/Places

The Secret Assignments

The Secret Assignments first began when Lydia, Emily, and Cassie were in grade school after their first fight. Lydia assigns them and generally they are a means of trying to solve a problem. As children, the assignments were more innocent and involved baking and sleepovers, but as the girls have grown up they have gotten more complex, ranging from dubiously motivated shoplifting to revealing their greatest fears.

The Notebook

The Notebook is a gift to Lydia from her father. It is a type of journal for aspiring young authors filled with writing prompts to get their creative juices flowing. Its rigid and patronizing tone irritates Lydia, who continues to use it because she wants to write professionally.

Cassie's Diary

Cassie's Diary is a journal given to Cassie by her father when she was twelve. Though Cassie does not like to write, she finds herself using the diary to help process all the feelings related to her father's death that she cannot articulate to her friends or counselor.

Ashbury

Ashbury is the private high school attended by Lydia, Emily, and Cassie. The students who attend Ashbury are from well-to-do families and the school has a reputation for well-behaved, intelligent students.

Brookfield

Brookfield is a local public high school with a bad reputation. The students who attend are variously described as having tattoos and criminal records, as well as being drug dealers and murderers.

Aristophanes and Cinque

Aristophanes and Cinque are Emily's two horses that she loves very much although she rarely gets to see or ride them.



The Trumpet

The Trumpet is the instrument "Matthew Dunlop" plays, and this musical connection with Cassie, who plays the piano, gives them a jumping off point for bonding.

Soccer

Soccer is Sebastian's favorite sport, and he often uses soccer references and metaphors to articulate his feelings to Lydia. His mother also uses the metaphor of getting close to the goal line but not scoring to help Sebastian put his self-destructive tendencies in perspective.

Women's Day Magazine

Women's Day is a magazine that profiled Lydia's celebrity mother. Charlie and Sebastian find a copy of the article in order to see what Lydia looks like.

The Blue Danish Cafe

The Blue Danish is the café where the girls often hang out after school, and the location of the first "covert mission" meeting between Lydia and Sebastian.

The Reserve

The Reserve is a wooded area behind Ashbury High School that the girls have to cut through to get to the train station when they cut school to see movies. Sebastian decorates it for Lydia as part of a mission, and it is the site of the meeting between Cassie and Paul Wilson.

The Spring Concert

The Spring Concert is a talent show at Ashbury that Cassie desperately wants to participate in, but she is too shy to volunteer to sing. After the inter-school vandalism, the concert is renamed the Spring for Unity! Concert, and becomes a joint effort between Ashbury and Brookfield to heal the bad feelings between the schools.

The United Nations Convention

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a document that Cassie initially offers "Matthew" in his fight to get his trumpet back. Emily later uses this document as evidence in the hearing regarding the reading of the girls' private papers.

Barney and Maribelle Learn to Fly

Barney and Maribelle Learn to Fly is the children's book Lydia and Seb write together for the Spring for Unity! Concert, based on the beginning of a story Lydia writes in her Notebook. Despite being a "children's" book, it is deemed too gruesome for children.



Themes

Identity / Sense of Self

Throughout the novel, Lydia, Emily, and Cassie struggle with trying to understand who they are as individuals, and who they might become as adults. This is a typical issue facing teenagers. The basic structure of the novel, writing letters to strangers, gives the girls an opportunity to explore their identity in a unique way: in the letters they have complete control over what to reveal about themselves or to project any image of themselves that they want. They can omit truths they don't want their pen pals to know, or make up wild fantasies to appear as someone they are not. This latitude is taken to its most extreme by Paul Wilson, who creates an entirely new person in his letters. On the other hand, the students can allow themselves to be completely vulnerable by revealing secrets that no one else knows. . Emily sums this theme up in her argument in favor of privacy in Chapter 30. She asserts, "When you are our age, you are thinking about many important things, such as who you are going to become" (Page 311). Teens can't talk about these things with their parents, who have a skewed view of them as "children." Thus teens talk to themselves and their friends, and "the way you really talk to yourself and your friends is through things like diaries and notebooks and letters" (Page 311) Writing offers the students a chance to step back and introspectively evaluate who they are.

As they travel toward adulthood, the girls are learning that life is not black and white, and neither are their personalities. Emily considers herself "dumb," and overcompensates by acting authoritative. When put to the test by acting as a lawyer in the privacy hearing, Emily surprises herself and everyone around her. Her sense of herself as not good enough to fulfill her dreams of becoming a lawyer is incorrect. Charlie challenges her too: by calling her out on her over confident declarations but still liking her, Emily learns that simply being herself - a smart, caring, loyal person - is okay.

The death of Cassie's father shakes her world at its foundation. Her close relationship with her father helped inform her sense of herself, and without him she is adrift. Yet she doesn't want anyone to know how she's truly feeling, so she puts on a façade of strength and well-being. Her mother and Claire believe she had "changed a bit after what happened, but [she] didn't know how to be the new self" (Page 336). She always liked sports and music, not school and writing. But suddenly she is writing letters and diary entries. She, Emily, and Lydia all believe she doesn't like to be the center of attention, and Cassie believes her fear defines her and would disappoint her father. But through her introspection she faces those fears and overcomes them, singing in the spring concert.

Lydia's sense of herself is tied up in writing. She wants to be an author, and she likes to control situations, so she believes her words have power. They represent her authentic self more than her appearance does, and she wants them to be heard and respected. Her reluctance to date Seb stems from a strong desire to keep her identity from being



tied to her looks, or to a man. Through her Secret Assignments Lydia believes she has indeed used words to control her world, but by the end of the book, she realizes she has to cede her desire for power and just let life happen. She is making a huge transition in her sense of herself by giving up writing for a while.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping plays a key role in the novel. As much as the girls are exploring who precisely they are, they are quick to judge others and box them into a "type." In the beginning, they scoff at the Brookfield students. Emily asserts that Brookfield students are all "drug dealers and murderers" (Page 6) but neither she nor her friends consider themselves delinquents for cutting school, shoplifting, and pulling pranks. Brookfield students hold an equally detrimental broad notion of Ashbury, denouncing all Ashbury students as private school snobs. Charlie writes Emily off after her first letter because he thinks she sounds like a "typical" private school girl. Fortunately, as the correspondence continues and each pair of pen pals learns to see each other as individuals, the stereotypes fall away. Though Charlie and Seb have gotten into as much trouble as one might expect given Brookfield's reputation, they prove they are also loyal, complicated people. Emily proves the same to Charlie.

Stereotyping is the crux of the cruelty perpetrated by Paul Wilson, aka "Matthew Dunlop," who doesn't try to get to know Cassie but diminishes her as a snobby private school girl. He reads her letters about counseling and cutting school and uses them to reinforce his image of Ashbury girls as people without real problems. Had Paul been open to learning about the real Cassie, and discovered that she was simply a girl hurting over the death of her father, the conflict in the book may not have unfolded so dramatically.

Even the teachers perpetuate these stereotypes, setting a bad example for the students, and by the end of the book it seems perhaps little has changed in these attitudes. When Emily, Lydia, and Cassie are exonerated during the hearing on privacy, Judge Koutchavalis, the headmistress of Ashbury, reinforces each school's stereotypes, praising the "nature" of Ashbury students as "diligent" while proclaiming the "criminal element" at Brookfield is responsible for the vandalism against Ashbury (Page 320). The novel presents a complicated view of stereotyping. Because of their reputation as "good," well-behaved Ashbury students, Emily, Lydia, and Cassie get away with their role in the pranking, and not only during the prank war. There are no penalties for the girls for cutting school, pulling false alarms, and stealing exams from a teacher's car. Readers might root for Paul Wilson to be punished for his cruelty and celebrate the girls' victory over him, but they should also ask themselves if it is fair that the girls suffer no consequences for their behavior simply because they are "good" kids from a "good" school, with well-respected, wealthy families.



Truth

Emily, Lydia, and Cassie's mothers all give a unique definition of truth to the girls, which they try to incorporate into their lives. First Cassie's mother tells them, "The point is, that there is no right or wrong; there is no one truth, there are lots of truths. And you girls should translate the world into as many languages as possible. If you see the world in just one language, your world becomes too small" (Page 200). When they share this with Emily's mother, she only agrees to a certain extent, saying, "I believe there are some absolute truths...I think you should never hurt other people, and never hurt yourself" (Page 236). Finally, Lydia's mother claims, "We had to listen for the truth inside our heads. 'If you have a thought,' she said, 'ask yourself why. And then always ask, 'Are you sure?'" (Page 261).

The girls often struggle to determine the truth. Emily often makes statements so firmly they sound like absolute truth, no matter how ridiculous they are. Yet despite her abhorrence of secrets, she lies to her friends about her true feelings about Charlie, she omits the truth of her role in the gas leak prank to him, and she may bodily harm herself to deal with her overwhelming emotions, but she does not tell anybody that either. Her failure to tell Charlie the truth almost destroys their budding relationship. Lydia and Seb's relationship is also put to the test when he lies to her, despite her direct questioning about how he recognized her. Cassie tests Lydia's mother's version of subjective, personal truth to get to the heart of what she truly fears, which is a failure to make her father proud. Her inability to share this truth with her friends drives a wedge between them.

The girls know each other as well, or perhaps better, than they know themselves, and can see the motives behind each other's behavior that each individual might not be able to see for herself. Thus in their letters, the girls find it easier to tell the truth about their friends than about themselves. Readers first learn that Cassie's father is dead through Emily's letter to Charlie (Page 59) and Cassie reveals that Lydia's hatred toward her parents is based on overdramatizations in Lydia's mind rather than reality (Page 110). Their ability to be objective has an adverse side however, when they aren't truthful with each other about each other. For example, Lydia doesn't believe Emily has what it takes to be a lawyer, but tells her she'll do better "next time" they have a test. Though Emily wants everyone to be "completely themselves," the girls have a hard time always being honest with each other because they don't want to hurt each other's feelings.



Style

Point of View

The Year of Secret Assignments is told from a variety of first person points of view: Lydia, Emily, Cassie, Charlie, Sebastian, Mr. Thompson. This theoretically means readers are getting a real inside perspectives on the characters' thoughts and feelings. But as Paul Wilson / Matthew Dunlop proves, it is easy to manipulate the truth or lie outright when the writer has full control over what information to include and exclude. Because of this potential manipulation, no one's narrative voice can be considered reliable. The reader (both the characters with the letters and the reader with the novel) may be easily duped by what is written. Readers cannot necessarily trust they are getting the full story in the letters. Everyone is caught up in the game of determining what is fact and what is fiction, and reading between the lines for what important details might be omitted. Readers must also pay particular attention to which narrator is saying what, since they sometimes contradict each other. The diary and Notebook entries allow Cassie and Lydia a more genuine, reliable narration, since they have nothing to hide from these outlets. But because Cassie doesn't trust words, it takes her almost to the end of the novel to give readers a true glimpse into what she's thinking. Similarly, because Lydia likes to exert a certain amount of control with her words, she doesn't frequently make herself vulnerable by being honest in her Notebook.

The novel is told in shifting past and present tense: the letter writers are telling what is happening to them generally as it is happening, or in the recent past. They occasionally recount memories to make points. The "Autumn Term" and "Winter Term" sections happen simultaneously in the present, so that the overlapping action of each is presented from different characters' points of view.

Setting

The novel is set in New South Wales, a province in Australia. Since the novel does not rely on a third person omniscient narrator, detailed descriptions of the locations are scarce, and the novel deals more in mental landscapes than physical. That said, most of the novel's action takes place in either Ashbury or Brookfield High Schools in the suburbs of Sydney. Ashbury is a private school for wealthy students: they have a show pony club and a swimming pool. Brookfield is a public high school close to Ashbury, and though there are no physical descriptions of it, readers can infer from its reputation that it is shabbier than Ashbury. Lydia lives a short distance away from Ashbury in a mansion in the Turrumurra suburb, but all three girls live in well-to-do neighborhoods. Their homes are luxurious, including wine cellars, furniture building studios, and glassed in breakfast nooks. By comparison, Charlie's home is an overcrowded house with constant bickering. The girls live in a higher economic bracket than the boys do, and this is one of the reasons for the initial prejudices between the students: Ashbury students look down on Brookfield students as "criminals" and Brookfield students believe all Ashbury



students are snobs. Each school has a reputation based on the socio-economic standing of the students who attend.

The Year of Secret Assignments is set in the present over the course of a single school year. The language is modern and informal, which helps ground the novel in the present. Seb's references to World Cups in the late '90s also lead to the conclusion that the book is set in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Language and Meaning

Moriarty has quite a project to juggle creating seven unique voices to tell the story of the book, six of which must sound like authentic teenagers. She does a particularly good job of distinguishing the voices of the three protagonists. Readers should be able to tell who is speaking given a brief sample of text. Emily peppers her letters with impressive vocabulary in order to sound smarter than she feels. Keen readers must stay alert while reading Emily's letters to delineate when she is using these words incorrectly, and tease out what word she intended. The transcript of the privacy hearing shows Emily speaking more formally, using the legal style she has been exposed to by her parents that is demonstrated in her father's letters. When she rebukes Charlie for correcting her vocabulary she demonstrates her propensity for linking the sound of words with the feelings those sounds evoke, rather than their actual meanings (Page 193).

Lydia, who wants to be a professional writer, uses the most poetic and descriptive language. For example, she writes Sebastian a letter comparing crisp potatoes with a rotten core to the world itself: superficially good but evil underneath. She uses language more carefully and seriously than Emily, but also more whimsically when she makes up stories. Cassie, the quietest, trusts words the least, and her sections tend to be shorter. Because they are teenagers writing letters, the language is generally casual and filled with slang. There is a marked difference between these letters and the letters of Emily's father, which is much more formal, and filled with a parody of legal language.

Structure

The Year of Secret Assignments is divided into 37 chapters that vary greatly in length from 2- 20+ pages. The main sections of overlapping correspondence between a pair of pen pals tend to be longer, as do the climactic chapters revolving around determining Matthew Dunlop's identity, getting Seb out of trouble, and the privacy hearing. The shorter chapters move the story forward chronologically, with the action building on the chapters that have come before. The two major sections of back-and-forth correspondence, in the "Autumn Term" and "Winter Term" happen simultaneously: each Emily/Lydia/Cassie chapter is happening in tandem with the others. Readers must stay alert to piece together the events that are happening at the same time from different characters' perspectives. For example, in Chapter 10 Emily tells Charlie she has gotten a secret assignment (Page 42) and Charlie recounts his heroic actions in saving the school from a gas leak. Then in Chapter 11, Sebastian worries continuously that Lydia

will not keep her promise to make the Brookfield alarm go off - until he hears Charlie on the PAGE A system telling the school to evacuate. Readers can piece together that Lydia masterminded the gas leak scam, and that Emily actually placed the call since she received a secret assignment directly before it occurred.



Quotes

"And there is nothing wrong with being a shy person is what I always say, as long as you tell your best friends every single thing inside your head. Incidentally, I am a bit suspicious that Cass is not obeying this proclamation" (Page 59).

"I think this is one of the strangest ways of getting to know someone ever" (Page 122).

"So how did he know it was me? Do I look like my letters that much? I don't even think I'm being myself in my letters, so how could I look like them?" (Page 124)

"I'm still not the kind of person who writes in diaries so I don't know what I'm doing here" (Page 126).

"I just think that if everyone is completely themselves, then we will all be okay. I am trying my hardest to be myself, and concentrating, etc. but I don't really know if myself is myself or if myself is good enough" (Page 162).

"Anyway, I'm writing to let you know that you don't know me. You think you got into my head - you think all that gabbling in my letters was the real me. But it wasn't, it was only words" (Page 184).

"The point is, that there is no right or wrong; there is no one truth, there are lots of truths. And you girls should translate the world into as many languages as possible. If you see the world in just one language, your world becomes too small" (Page 200).

"Her assignments have really changed lately, haven't they? There is almost no shoplifting or 'prank calling' or cake baking. It is all about writing things down, and I have to say I'm a fairly different person when I write things down" (Page 255).

"Because people are always telling to be ourselves or be true to ourselves and I always think: Whatever. Because who is myself?" (Page 261)

"I don't know about letters. Maybe talking is better" (Page 262).

"I guess the thing is, I thought you were getting to know me on one level, and that you liked me because of my letters. Whereas in fact, you were just interested in the regular way. So how can I trust that you like who I really am?" (Page 275)

"If you teachers go through our lockers, and read our notebooks, etc., well, you know what you will be doing? You'll be taking the fragile pieces of paper which decide who we are going to be - and you'll be tearing them to shreds" (Pages 311-2).

"For a start, I think I have this idea that I can do anything by writing. Like I can be myself if I write letters, and I can help my friends if I write Secret Assignments. Like I can change things, punish people, fall in love, and find myself, all by writing the right words" (Page 331).



"Then she said she thought maybe I'd changed a bit after what happened, but I didn't know how to be the new self with Lyd and Em. Because they knew me as the old me" (Page 336).



Topics for Discussion

Many of the characters in the novel are guilty of petty crimes and cruel pranks. Choose two examples from the novel and compare/contrast the consequences on the characters' lives. Do you think punishment was handed out fairly amongst the teenagers? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Lydia, Cassie, and Emily's mothers each have a different definition of truth. First, define each mother's definition and describe what it says about their parenting style. In your opinion, which definition is best? Which definition most corresponds to the novel's themes? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

In Chapter 27, Cassie claims, "I don't know about letters. Maybe talking is better" (Page 262). What advantages / disadvantages occur as the teens get to know each other through letters rather than talking? Do you think the book makes a compelling argument for the written word as a means to get to know someone? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Do you think the adults are represented realistically in this book? Why or why not? How do the parents' reactions to the trial at the end of the novel reflect their parenting styles? How might the parents of the Brookfield boys have reacted if they were present? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What advantages and disadvantages does the novel illustrate of a lifelong friendship like the one between Lydia, Cassie, and Emily? How do your friendships compare / contrast to the friendships in the book? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

The letter writers have complete control over what they reveal or omit. What are some of the novel's conflicts that could have been avoided with more honesty? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Many of the characters in the novel struggle with their personal identities. Choose two characters and compare / contrast their journey to enlightenment. What major events lead them to discover their true selves? Is this important? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.