

Fish in a Tree



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LYNDA MULLALY HUNT

Lynda Mullaly Hunt was born in Tennessee in 1960. She was the youngest of five children and led an active and outdoorsy lifestyle as a young person. One of her brothers died just before his fourth birthday, and throughout her childhood, Hunt wrote songs about him, which she credits as being the foundation for her later writing career. She earned two degrees in education and as a teacher found that her students were much more receptive to having their own writing edited when they also got the opportunity to edit her work. This led Hunt to begin writing stories (which she says were purposefully written horribly) to then give to her students to correct. She left teaching to have her two children and then joined a writer's group when they were young. Her debut novel, *One for the Murphys*, was published in 2012. She began writing what eventually would become *Fish in a Tree* at this time, which was initially titled *Alphabet Soup* and set in the 1970s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dyslexia is a learning disability characterized by trouble reading, spelling, and sounding out words—though these are only some of the symptoms, and not all dyslexics experience every possible symptom or experience them all to the same degree. It was identified in the 1880s and, at first, the term only referred to the reading problems and not some of the other possible symptoms or characteristics of people with the disorder, which in Ally's case include difficulty paying attention, thinking only in pictures, and struggling to hold a writing utensil normally. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), U.S. schools are required to provide testing and, if a child is identified as having dyslexia, provide special services tailored to their needs. Dyslexia isn't something that can be cured, but with specialized instruction, people with dyslexia can develop tools and tricks that help them overcome barriers to reading.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Fish in a Tree joins a growing body of teen and children's literature that explores characters with disabilities or major differences from their classmates or peers. These take place in both real-world settings, like in R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* and Harriet Johnson's *Accidents of Nature*, as well as more fantastical settings, as in Lois Lowry's *Gathering Blue* or Holly Black's *The Iron Trial*. As a book about the role an exceptional and caring teacher can have in a student's life, *Fish in a Tree* also

shares similarities with books like *Sahara Special* by Esmé Raji Codell, Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, and the Harry Potter series. Ally also reads Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* with Mr. Daniels's help, and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* acts as a motif throughout the novel.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Fish in a Tree
- **When Written:** 2012-2014
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, Issue novel
- **Setting:** A small town in the northeastern U.S., mid-2010s
- **Climax:** Ally wins the election for class president
- **Antagonist:** Shay, Dyslexia
- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by Ally

EXTRA CREDIT

Different Languages. People with dyslexia tend to have a more difficult time if they speak English or French, as the languages are considered orthographically complex—that is, the relationships between letters and sounds aren't always predictable. Italian and Spanish pose fewer problems, while logographic languages like Chinese are extremely difficult given that they use symbols to signify whole words. People who speak languages that aren't written don't experience dyslexia at all!

Backwards. Despite the common belief that dyslexics see letters backwards, this isn't true; many kids first learning to write will write letters backwards, whether dyslexic or not. This belief possibly arose from what's called the "recency effect," in which a dyslexic reader will say a word using the most recent sound first (for example, saying "pal" instead of "lap").



PLOT SUMMARY

Ally, a sixth-grade student, argues with her teacher, Mrs. Hall, about her writing assignment. She's supposed to be writing about herself so that when Mrs. Hall goes on maternity leave, the new teacher can learn about the students. After some arguing, Ally covers her paper with the word "why?" She admits to the reader that she doesn't want to write because she can't read or write, no matter how hard she tries.

Mrs. Hall's baby shower is a few days later. Ally gives her teacher a card with yellow roses on it, but Mrs. Hall doesn't

look happy. Shay, the class bully, reads the card and tells Ally she's dumb. Ally is confused until the principal, Mrs. Silver, asks her why she'd give a sympathy card at a baby shower. In the office, Mrs. Silver asks Ally to read a poster on the wall. There are two hands reaching towards each other and Ally pretends she can read it. That afternoon, as Ally tries to do homework at the restaurant where Mom works, Shay and her friend Jessica stop and tease Ally about being dumb. Ally draws in her **Sketchbook of Impossible Things**, where she records things that will never happen in real life.

That weekend, Ally's big brother, Travis, takes Ally **coin** shopping. The salesman doesn't take Travis seriously, which Travis uses to his advantage to buy a valuable coin for himself and a special dime for Ally. The coins were minted in the year that their Grandpa, who died about a year ago, was born. Ally is shocked to learn that coins are only valuable when they're different.

Ally's new teacher, Mr. Daniels, asks his students to participate in a show-and-tell exercise. Keisha, a new student, brings in a homemade cupcake while Albert, a hulking and science-loving boy, brings in water. Ally shows the class a steel penny, which Dad gave to her before he was deployed.

A few days later, Mr. Daniels hands out notebooks. The students can write whatever they want, and he won't grade them, so Ally tests this by drawing a black cube. Mr. Daniels asks her about it and when she says it's a dark room where she can be invisible, he tells her he's glad she's not invisible. At lunch, Ally accepts Shay and Jessica's offer to sit with them. She's jealous of their **friendship bracelets** and wants to be a part of something. Ally goes along with them when they tease Albert, though she apologizes to him the next day.

Backstage before the holiday concert, as Mrs. Muldoon passes out bouquets to the girls, Keisha touches her flowers and a bud breaks off. Mrs. Muldoon takes the bouquet away from Keisha while Shay makes snide comments. Ally breaks her bouquet in half so Keisha can have flowers, though Mrs. Muldoon takes her flowers away too. The girls become friends and begin eating lunch together.

Ally begins to try to do her writing assignments, as she realizes she'd like Mr. Daniels to like her. Travis refuses to help Ally with them, saying he can fix cars like a natural but writing isn't something he can do. Ally turns in one assignment, worried Mr. Daniels will think it took minutes. When he asks her how long it took, she tells the truth: hours. Despite this, Ally contrives ways to get out of writing, including faking a broken arm. Noticing that Albert is always covered in bruises, Ally invites him to eat lunch with her and Keisha. She learns that Albert gets free lunch. Shay and Jessica tease Albert, Ally, and Keisha about being misfit toys, and Ally begins to think that, just as many of the misfit toys are normal save for odd names, there has to be more to her than just being a "slow reader."

Later, Ally and Keisha learn that Albert always wears a shirt that reads "Flint" because Flint is his favorite *Star Trek* character. Flint lives on his own planet to escape unkind people, and Albert finds this appealing. That afternoon, Keisha and Albert come to Petersen's for ice cream. Keisha tries to convince Albert to fight the bullies who beat him up every day, but he refuses.

During a vocabulary lesson, Mr. Daniels asks a volunteer to describe the difference between "alone" and "lonely." Ally raises her hand and though her answer is brilliant, she still feels like she did something wrong. Later, Mr. Daniels asks the class to write about fictional heroes. Ally makes up a hero Roy G. Biv, who symbolizes the color spectrum. Though she writes her paper, Mr. Daniels asks her to tell him about Roy G. Biv rather than just writing about him. He praises her for being an out-of-the-box thinker. After Ally presents her hero to the class, she overhears Shay and Jessica talking about friendship bracelets and learns that Shay is actually selling them.

Mr. Daniels announces that he created a poetry competition and names Ally the winner. Though she's initially happy, she soon realizes it's a pity award and runs out of the room, humiliated. Keisha gives Ally a pep talk and says it's silly to want to fit in.

After school one day, Mr. Daniels asks Ally if reading gives her headaches and if letters move on the page. She's shocked when she picks up on the fact that these things aren't normal. He offers to teach her chess after school to excuse her from homework. Ally accepts. A few days later, while on a field trip at the Noah Webster museum, Mr. Daniels joins Ally outside and tells her that she might have dyslexia, a reading disability. He tells her that she can learn to read, she just needs to learn in different ways. Ally feels hopeful for the first time. Over the next few weeks, Ally begins to play chess and undergoes testing. She does have dyslexia and agrees to stay after school more to work with Mr. Daniels on reading as well as chess, which she finds fun and easy.

One afternoon, Ally, Mom, and Travis Skype with Dad. Ally tells Dad about all her good news, but Travis doesn't have much good news: his new manager at the auto shop wants him to look things up in the book before performing repairs, which Travis finds difficult. Ally continues to stay after school with Mr. Daniels, who guides her through an exercise to show her that anything is possible. Ally keeps the paper that reads "possible" in her pocket. Later, while hanging out at Albert's house, Ally confides in her friends that she has a hard time in school because she has dyslexia.

On Monday, there's a sub at school. The sub says out loud that Ally can draw instead of write, which encourages Shay to say mean things. Ally feels so betrayed that she writes a note for Mr. Daniels saying she won't stay after school anymore. The next day, Mr. Daniels apologizes and assures Ally he never meant to hurt her. A few days later Mr. Daniels assigns a logic

puzzle, and Ally is the only one to solve it without help.

A week later, Jessica nominates Shay for class president. Shay nominates Ally. Ally agrees to run and spends all night writing a speech. The next morning, with Albert and Keisha's encouragement, Ally tells her class she wants to magnify everyone's voices. Shay promises impossible things, like bigger lockers and longer recesses. Mr. Daniels counts the ballots in front of the class and surprisingly, Ally wins. The next day, Ally receives what she believes is a love letter from Max, a popular classmate. She can't read it but later that afternoon, she discovers that Shay actually wrote the letter as an attempt to embarrass Ally. Max finds out as well and is very upset with Shay.

Mr. Daniels gives Ally a chapter book to read. She later completes a detailed diorama of the house from the book, prompting Mr. Daniels to tell Ally he's proud of her—the first time she's heard this from a teacher. That evening, as Ally draws in her *Sketchbook of Impossible Things*, she muses that her sketchbook isn't the only thing that makes her happy anymore. Travis asks Ally what she's learning with Mr. Daniels, but he refuses Ally's offer to teach him some of her new tricks.

During a social studies unit, Mr. Daniels asks the class to tell him about famous people including Albert Einstein, George Washington, and Henry Ford. Mr. Daniels explains that it's believed that those people had dyslexia, but they still changed the world. Ally is shaken to learn that others likely thought they were stupid too. Over the next few days, Ally's classmates tell her that they think it's cool she has dyslexia. Shay's followers even stop participating in the bullying and leave their friendship bracelets on Shay's desk. Ally tries to reach out to Shay, but Shay responds meanly.

As Ally, Keisha, and Albert walk home from school, the bullies attack them. Albert finally fights back and Ally realizes that he cares too much about his friends to let others hurt them. The next day, Ally goes to Mrs. Silver's office with a note. Ally asks Mrs. Silver to read the poster with the hands, which reads that it's brave to ask for help. Mrs. Silver apologizes for not helping Ally sooner and tells Ally that she's won student of the month. After school that day, when Travis arrives to pick up Ally, Ally realizes that Travis must be dyslexic too. She runs and asks Mr. Daniels if he'd help Travis learn to read, and Mr. Daniels agrees. Ally feels as though anything is possible.

smart or a dedicated enough student, Ally believes that she's dumb. She often refuses to do her homework and her inability to read means that she struggles socially. This is why she gives Mrs. Hall a sympathy card for her baby shower; she couldn't read the card and therefore, didn't know that it wasn't appropriate. In turn, this makes Ally a prime target for bullies. Ally also fears admitting that she needs help, and to cope draws in her *Sketchbook of Impossible Things* and watches "mind movies," which help her escape from reality. Things begin to change when Mr. Daniels takes over for Mrs. Hall. Soon, Ally discovers that she'd like to impress Mr. Daniels, so she starts to try harder to complete her assignments. She also begins to tell the truth when Mr. Daniels asks her questions about her homework, such as how long it takes her and whether letters move on the page. Mr. Daniels asks Ally to undergo testing for dyslexia, which she discovers that she does indeed have. The two begin to play chess, which engages Ally's visual brain and gives her something at which she can be successful, and also begin doing exercises that help Ally develop tricks to read. As these successes pile up, Ally learns to trust Mr. Daniels and herself, winning the election for class president in the process. Ally also discovers that many famous people had dyslexia, which makes her feel like she can be successful. She finally pays her successes forward by inviting her dyslexic brother, Travis, to attend tutoring sessions so that he can learn to read too.

Mr. Daniels – Mr. Daniels is a young teacher who takes over for Mrs. Hall sometime around Thanksgiving and is the first to recognize that Ally has dyslexia. A kind and thoughtful man studying to become a special education teacher, he calls his students "Fantasticos," celebrates their differences, and takes a firm stand against bullying. Ally also notices early on that Mr. Daniels has a signal with Oliver, a boy who struggles with impulse control, to quietly tell him to settle down. Mr. Daniels is an encouraging presence in Ally's life, often engaging her in lessons that show her that she can do well—such as his "mystery box" exercise and mental math lessons. As Ally begins to trust Mr. Daniels and try more often to turn in her writing homework, Mr. Daniels starts to suspect that Ally isn't just missing homework because she doesn't want to do it. He asks her questions about how long it takes her to write, if it hurts her head to read and write, and if letters move on the page. With all of this, he thanks her for her honesty and tells her that she just thinks differently. Finally, Mr. Daniels asks Ally to get tested for dyslexia. When Ally's results show that she is dyslexic, they begin working together after school. He also starts to teach her to play chess, as he recognizes that chess is easier for a visual learner and will give Ally something to be successful at. One of his final lessons seeks to show Ally that she's not alone by presenting a number of famous and influential people who also had dyslexia to his class. Near the end of the school year, he also agrees to tutor Ally's brother, Travis, whom Ally believes also has dyslexia.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ally – The story's protagonist, Ally is a sixth-grade student who, unbeknownst to herself for much of the novel, has dyslexia. Though Ally is extremely smart, good at math, and a talented artist, she can barely read and struggles to write. After seven years, seven schools, and seven teachers implying that Ally isn't

Keisha – Keisha is a new girl at school with whom Ally becomes very close. She's the only black girl and is extremely confident in herself and her abilities. This causes her to challenge Shay regularly and stand up for others, something that Ally admires greatly. She and Ally start to become friends after Mr. Daniels rearranges the seating chart to seat them next to each other. Though their exchanges start off rocky, Keisha is very grateful for Ally's kindness when the latter tries to share her bouquet with Keisha at the holiday concert after Keisha's bouquet is unfairly taken away. A few weeks into their friendship, Keisha joins Ally in accepting Albert into the group. She humors Albert by watching *Star Trek* (though she insults the special effects) and tries to figure out what the word "Flint" on Albert's shirt might refer to. Keisha continues to have no time for bullies, so she takes issue with Albert when she learns that he doesn't fight back when, nearly every afternoon, a group of bullies beats him up—though in Ally's opinion, Keisha pushes Albert too hard to fight back. When Ally runs for class president, Keisha is one of Ally's biggest supporters. Even more importantly, when Ally experiences situations in which she struggles with her self-esteem, Keisha counsels Ally to take pride in her differences and the things she can do well. She points out that they don't want to be mean like Shay is and that trying to please people who want them to be the same as everyone else is a waste of time. Keisha wants to be a baker when she grows up, so she spends much of her free time baking cupcakes with secret messages inside.

Albert – Albert is one of Ally's best friends. A hulking boy who loves science and logic, he comes to school every day wearing a shirt that reads "Flint" and a pair of jeans. He's also often covered in fresh bruises. While everyone in Ally's class agrees that Albert is smart, they often find his insistence on exactitude and his pedantic nature trying. Shay teases Albert for this as well as for his family's poverty, which is often apparent in the clothes that Albert wears. Ally eventually invites Albert to sit with her and Keisha, and the three become close friends. Keisha and Ally learn that Albert gets free lunch, that Albert's dad is an inventor who named Albert after Albert Einstein, and that his bruises come from a group of bullies who beat Albert up almost daily after school. Because Albert is a pacifist, he doesn't fight back. However, this doesn't mean that this treatment doesn't bother him; he reveals that his "Flint" shirts are a reference to a *Star Trek* character named Flint, who fled to a planet to live with robots to escape unkind people on Earth. Albert still makes an effort to not let bullies see that they're bothering him, as he believes this will make the bullying worse. He wants to be a scientist when he grows up, and when it comes out that Ally has dyslexia and Albert learns how many great scientists have had dyslexia as well, he confides in Ally that he almost wishes he had it too. Albert finally stands up to the bullies when they try to pick on Ally and Keisha. It only takes a couple of punches, but the novel implies that Albert will never have to deal with the bullies again. He seems more

confident and happier after standing up for himself and his friends.

Shay – Shay is the class bully. She's wealthy and is always surrounded by Jessica and a number of other girls whom Ally just refers to as Shay's followers. All of these girls wear **friendship bracelets**, which Ally is jealous of and sees as proof that they all care about each other. Because of Ally's jealousy in this regard, Shay is able to draw Ally into her bullying on occasion. Shay's preferred angle for her bullying is to tear down her classmates for their financial status, which in most cases seems to be much lower than her own. She also attacks classmates for being different or "freaks." After Mr. Daniels takes away Shay's recess for bullying Oliver, Shay becomes very sneaky about her bullying. This makes it harder for teachers to stop, though by that point, Mr. Daniels has already given his other students tools that empower them to stand up to Shay themselves. Eventually, Ally learns that Shay actually sells the friendship bracelets to her friends, which shows Ally that Shay doesn't actually have friends—she just scares others into following her. After this, Shay's power gradually disappears. Though she tries to bully her classmates into first not running against her for class president and then into voting for her, Ally wins the election. After Shay's loss, Ally learns that Shay is a bully because Shay's mom is also cruel and obsessed with being the best. In the weeks that follow, Jessica and the rest of Shay's followers begin to abandon her and even leave their friendship bracelets on Shay's desk. Though Ally tries to approach Shay and reach out kindly, Shay rejects the attempt and chooses to continue acting meanly.

Travis – Travis is Ally's big brother. He's in high school, though Ally never shares what grade. School has never been Travis's thing; the novel implies that, like Ally, Travis is dyslexic. He talks about words moving and not making any sense to him, though Mom insists that Travis stick with school at least through high school. Travis's true passions are **coin** collecting and cars. He often takes Ally with him when he goes to pawn shops to purchase coins, where he proves himself both an adept bargainer and a kind and supportive sibling (for example, he buys Ally special coins to remind her of their Grandpa and that she's loved). After school and on weekends, he works at an auto shop and fixes up old machines to sell. His dream is to one day open up his own shop. This seems within reach for Travis until his manager has to undergo back surgery. The interim manager makes Travis look up how to perform repairs in a manual before letting him do anything on cars in the shop—without taking into account that Travis has an innate sense of how to fix the cars and, because of his dyslexia, surely struggles to read the manual. He becomes angry and withdrawn about this as time goes on, though he expresses interest in Ally's tutoring with Mr. Daniels. Finally, near the end of the school year, Ally asks Mr. Daniels if she can bring Travis to their tutoring sessions so he can learn to read too. Both Mr. Daniels and Travis agree, and

Ally recognizes that Travis is finally ready to ask for and accept help.

Mom – Ally's mom works at a restaurant called A. C. Petersen's as a waitress, which means that Ally often either does homework at the restaurant or is home unsupervised, given that Mom works late. Though Mom is supportive of her children and loves them unconditionally, having two children with unidentified dyslexia is difficult for her. She forces Travis to stay in high school and is clearly tired of receiving phone calls from Ally's school. Because Ally's dyslexia is unidentified, Mom agrees with Ally's teachers and believes that Ally simply isn't trying hard enough and is making trouble on purpose. At the same time, Mom knows that Ally is smart and tells her so often. She also praises Ally for her drawings, her thoughtfulness, and her kindness. Ally desperately wants Mom to be happy, so she does what she can to let Mom think she has friends and tries not to get Mom's hopes up when she runs for class president. Mom is thrilled when Ally makes friends and begins doing better in school, and she fully supports Ally's tutoring sessions with Mr. Daniels.

Jessica – Jessica is Shay's best friend and, as Ally sees it, her shadow. She describes Jessica as having few personality traits or interests of her own, as her main goal seems to be following Shay and keeping her happy. Ally sees Jessica's decision to bring in a photo of Shay for a show-and-tell exercise as proof of this. This means that, like Shay, Jessica is mean and bullies everyone that Shay does—though Shay uses their bullying sessions to surreptitiously make fun of Jessica as well as their target. Jessica gradually becomes less comfortable going along with Shay's bullying, especially after it gets out that Shay charges for her **friendship bracelets**. After Mr. Daniels's lesson about famous people with dyslexia, Jessica and the rest of Shay's followers give back their friendship bracelets and Jessica begins to shut down Shay's attempts to bully others. She even apologizes to Ally for her poor treatment.

Oliver – Oliver is one of Ally's classmates. He's always talking and moving, which makes him a common target of bullying. In the week after Mr. Daniels arrives to teach, Ally notices that Oliver likely has self-esteem issues, just like she does; one mean look from Jessica makes him cower. She also realizes that Mr. Daniels and Oliver have a signal that allows Mr. Daniels to tell Oliver to quiet down without calling him out and embarrassing him. Though Shay continues to pick on Oliver, Oliver's confidence grows over the course of the novel. When Ally is finally in a place where she feels better about herself, she begins to see that Oliver is actually very funny and thoughtful. Mr. Daniels even compliments Oliver explicitly on his kindness, saying that Oliver will grow up to be a great man with his kind heart.

Dad – Ally's dad; he's the captain of a tank unit in the Army, though Ally never says where he's fighting. At the start of the novel, he's been deployed for about a year. Both Dad and

Grandpa were avid **coin** collectors and passed their love of this hobby onto Ally and Travis. Dad talks about coins as being symbolic of change and the necessity of uniqueness. During the family's one Skype conversation with Dad, Dad appears to be very interested in his children's lives. He's supportive of Ally's new friends and her tutoring with Mr. Daniels, and he does his best to encourage Travis to keep trying despite the difficulties he's having at work.

Mrs. Silver – The principal at Ally's school. At the start of the novel, Mrs. Silver is exasperated with how often she sees Ally in her office. She tells Ally that the sympathy card is too far out of line and, like Mom, she believes that Ally does things like that on purpose. Thanks to Mr. Daniels Ally doesn't see much of Mrs. Silver for the rest of the novel until she wins student of the month. At that point, Mrs. Silver apologizes to Ally for not suspecting dyslexia earlier and tells Ally that she's proud of all the progress she's made.

Grandpa – Ally's maternal grandfather; he's been dead for about a year at the start of the novel. He loved collecting **coins** and also loved *Alice in Wonderland*. Ally has his old copy of the book, which has large print and she hopes to read one day. She named her sketchbook the **Sketchbook of Impossible Things** after *Alice in Wonderland*. Ally thinks about her grandfather often. He was a wise man who was very involved in his grandchildren's lives, and he also moved with Ally's family whenever Dad was reassigned.

Suki – One of Ally's classmates; she's a Japanese immigrant and is still learning English. When she's nervous she rolls a carved wooden block around in her hands, and she's often anxious when Shay bullies others. Suki later shares that her grandfather carved the blocks for her when she still lived in Japan, and that she misses him greatly. Suki and Ally are able to connect through their individual love for their respective grandfathers, and as Ally becomes more confident, she finds that she admires Suki for her bravery in coming to a new country and learning a new language.

Max – A popular and sporty boy in Ally's class. He loves parties and wants to throw one at school at every opportunity. Though he hangs out with Shay, Jessica, and the other popular girls, Ally implies that Max is nicer than they are and doesn't bully people. He'll play with Oliver at times and, when he discovers that Shay staged a love letter from him to Ally, he's very upset with her and with Jessica.

Mrs. Hall – Mrs. Hall is Ally's teacher at the beginning of the novel. She's pregnant and soon to go on maternity leave. Ally doesn't dislike Mrs. Hall; in fact, she's thrilled to be able to give Mrs. Hall a beautiful card with flowers on it for her baby shower. This backfires, though, when Ally discovers that the card is actually a sympathy card, which makes Mrs. Hall very sad.

Albert's Dad – Though Albert's dad never appears in the novel

in person, Albert talks about him on several occasions. He's an inventor, though it's not clear what he's trying to invent. He named Albert after Albert Einstein in the hope that Albert would want to follow in Einstein's footsteps as well as his own to become a scientist or inventor.

The Bullies – Three boys who are much smaller than Albert but who beat him up daily after school regardless. They tease Albert for being poor and for not wanting to fight back, and they have no qualms about verbally and physically bullying Ally and Keisha one day as well. At this point Albert punches the ringleader, which is implied to bring the end of the bullies' reign of terror over Albert.

Shay's Mom – A very wealthy woman, Shay's mom berates her daughter when Shay loses the election for class president. Her rant implies that she believed that the outlandish promises Shay made during her speech—which she helped write—would make Shay the clear choice for the election. She blames Shay for the failure and makes Shay shrink.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Muldoon – The overbearing and exacting music teacher at Ally's school. She's prone to blowing up over the slightest "infractions," which leads Max to call her Minefield Muldoon. She takes away Ally and Keisha's flowers at the holiday concert because the girls weren't appropriately respectful of their bouquets.

Audrey – Albert's mom. She's perplexed when Albert brings home friends for the first time and though she offers Ally and Keisha food, Albert later admits that she actually had no food to give them.

The Sub – A woman who substitutes for Mr. Daniels's class. She humiliates Ally by reading Mr. Daniels's note that Ally can draw instead of write out loud and then doesn't stop Shay when she bullies Ally for it.

The Salesman – A salesman at a pawnshop. He initially tries to take advantage of Travis by showing him a penny that had been chemically altered, but eventually makes a deal with him to sell him valuable **coins**.

The Third Grade Teacher – The only teacher who ever said outright that she thought Ally was slow.

Miss Kessler – The reading specialist at Ally's school.



DYSLEXIA, INTELLIGENCE, AND LEARNING

Fish in a Tree tells the story of Ally, a sixth grade student with unidentified dyslexia. Dyslexia is a learning disorder that means that Ally has a hard time reading and writing—she gets headaches, words seem to move on the page, and it takes her hours to write a paragraph. Ally believes that she's unintelligent and will never learn to read until her long-term substitute teacher, Mr. Daniels, suggests that she undergo testing for the disorder and begins to help her learn to read after school. As Ally begins to improve and thrives under Mr. Daniels's mentorship, she eventually comes to understand that dyslexia isn't a matter of intelligence as she initially thought. Instead, she begins to shift her thinking to believe that there can be many different kinds of intelligence and ways to learn, all of which are simply different, not better or worse than any other.

Ally begins the novel with a set idea of what constitutes "smart." For her, being smart means that a person, first of all, can read, which then allows that person to do well in school, complete their homework, and make friends. At first, Ally can do none of these things. She does whatever she can to avoid reading, especially out loud; her inability to read means that she resorts to making up words that she can't identify quickly, often with humorous results (as when she reads about the "macaroni" swimming down the river, not the "manatee"). Though her classmates find this funny, it also encourages them to think of her as being weird and unlikeable, as it often appears to be a bid for attention—when in reality, Ally just doesn't want to suffer the embarrassment of admitting to her teacher that she can't read. She also avoids writing, as her dyslexia combined with dysgraphia (mixing up letters on the page) means that what she writes is often unintelligible—even though the paragraph or report in Ally's head is cohesive and well thought-out. All of this works together to make it seem to everyone—Ally's teachers, classmates, and Ally herself—that Ally is unintelligent, a troublemaker, and bad at school.

However, Ally's internal monologue, which takes the form of visual "mind movies," and her **Sketchbook of Impossible Things**, where she draws the contents of these mind movies, make it clear that there's more to Ally than her poor school performance. Ally's mind movies, which are thoughts that she sees when her attention wanders, are detailed, fantastical, and make it clear to the reader (the only other person who, for much of the novel, is privy to them) that it's not Ally's intelligence that's in question. Instead, she simply cannot convey the ideas in her head to others in a way that's accepted at school. Notably, Ally has this problem primarily because in a conventional school setting, students are evaluated on their ability to read and demonstrate their knowledge through writing, not necessarily on their thoughts when expressed orally or through pictures. This suggests that the issue is



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

twofold: while it's true that Ally will have a difficult time in school because she can't demonstrate her knowledge in a way that teachers want her to, the school system also doesn't allow for individuals like Ally to show what they know in ways that would allow them to succeed.

Fortunately for Ally, Mr. Daniels recognizes that Ally isn't stupid at all. He makes it clear to all of his students that in his classroom, different types of intelligence are valuable and should be celebrated. In doing so, allows Ally to begin showing him what she knows in ways that work for her. Mr. Daniels celebrates Ally's drawings and encourages her to tell him her reports, not just write them down. Later, when he has her tested for dyslexia, begins teaching her to play chess, and starts working with her to develop tools to make reading easier, Ally begins to believe Mr. Daniels's constant refrain: that Ally's brain simply works differently and her strengths lay in visual expression, not in reading. In other words, Mr. Daniels creates an environment in which Ally is able to show what she knows in a way that allows her to use her strengths to her advantage, while also teaching her how to be more successful in the areas where she struggles.

With this, the novel does two things. It first continues Mr. Daniels's project of making it clear that there are multiple ways to be intelligent, if only a person is given the opportunity to choose their mode of expression. Second, it recognizes the constraints and the norms of the world that Ally lives in, where literacy and being able to perform in a conventional school setting offer a person a much easier path to success than eschewing school and reading altogether. Taken together, *Fish in a Tree* then offers a hopeful vision for the future in which all students can be recognized and celebrated for their strengths, while also acknowledging the damage that can be done when students are allowed to believe that their learning differences make them lesser than their classmates.



TEACHING, MENTORING, AND TRUST

Ally's academic failures have a lot to do with the fact that because her dad is in the military, her family has moved about once per year since she started school. Because of this, Ally has never had the opportunity to form connections with her teachers or school administrators who, given the time and the wherewithal, could've identified her dyslexia and helped her learn to read much earlier than sixth grade; instead, she's come to believe that teachers are out to get her and that she's not smart. Especially when contrasted with this initial worldview, the positive and trusting relationship that Ally later forms with Mr. Daniels illustrates that for all students, but especially those like Ally who struggle with learning disabilities, behavioral issues, or low self-esteem, teachers have an immense amount of power to either help their pupils learn or rob them of knowledge and opportunities.

Fish in a Tree makes the amount of power that teachers have over their students clear from the beginning: Ally shares with the reader that during a parent-teacher conference, her third grade teacher told Mom that Ally was slow. Though this teacher is the only to say such a thing outright, Ally receives similar messages from most of her other teachers over the years. Hearing this over and over again culminates in Ally's belief that she actually *is* slow or dumb, which she believes in part because these prominent authority figures in her life have been repeating it for the entirety of her school career. This illustrates the dark and potentially dangerous side of the relationship between teachers and students: teachers have the power to fundamentally influence how their students think about themselves, for better and for worse. In other words, what they say about their students matters a great deal, even if the students in question don't like or trust their teacher.

Ally begins to suspect that the teacher-student relationship doesn't have to be this way on her first day in Mr. Daniels's class. Mr. Daniels arrives a few months into the school year to take over for Mrs. Hall, who is going on maternity leave, and he brings an entirely different tenor to the classroom. Though Ally remains convinced for several more months that she's dumb, she notices that Mr. Daniels does what he can to not draw attention to his students with learning differences or disabilities. She catches on quickly to the fact that Mr. Daniels seems to have a secret signal set up with Oliver, a classmate who struggles with speaking out of turn, that allows him to correct Oliver without actually calling him out and embarrassing him. Mr. Daniels also tells Ally that he won't send her to the office when she "misbehaves," something that suggests that he believes building relationships with his students, and not outsourcing to the principal, Mrs. Silver, can be far more effective for managing his classroom.

In doing all of this, Mr. Daniels treats his students like people first, with unique needs that he believes it's his responsibility to acknowledge and attend to. This in turn helps students like Oliver and Ally, who previously found school a place where they needed to be on guard at all times, relax—they're able to trust that they won't be punished for being different. This comes into play especially when Mr. Daniels advocates for Ally to receive testing for dyslexia and then offers to tutor her after school. In his initial offer to work with her, Mr. Daniels insists that Ally isn't dumb and that she *can* learn to read with the proper tools. He also shakes hands with her to make it clear that learning to read is a journey they're setting off on together, not something she's being forced into because her teacher told her to. The way that Mr. Daniels interacts with his students helps Ally realize that teachers aren't just authority figures out to get her; they can be trustworthy mentors who have the power to help her succeed.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive relationship between Mr. Daniels and Ally, it's important to keep in mind that Ally has

already been through seven years of school and seven different teachers before finally encountering a teacher willing and able to meet her where she is and develop this kind of relationship with her. Even worse, her older brother Travis, who also has dyslexia, is midway through high school and hasn't yet met a teacher able to identify his dyslexia and help him succeed. These sobering facts speak to the flaws in the American school system more broadly, as well as the unhelpful and potentially damaging ways in which teachers are trained to interact with differently-abled students. Mr. Daniels himself, however, offers an example of what a good teacher and mentor looks like: he instills confidence, treats his students with compassion and empathy, and empowers students by helping them find the tools that will help them learn best.



IDENTITY AND SELF-ESTEEM

In many ways, *Fish in a Tree* is a classic coming of age novel: over the year that Ally spends in Mr. Daniels's classroom, she transforms from a

withdrawn, anxious, and poor student to one that is confident, feels connected to her classmates, and can think hopefully about her future. Ally is able to do this primarily because, for the first time in her school career, she has a teacher who tells her that she's smart in a different way, which Ally eventually comes to believe herself. Through Ally's journey, the novel suggests that a person's identity is made up of stories that they tell about themselves and that others tell about them, and that those stories become true when they're repeated often enough—but also, that a person's identity can change when they change those narratives.

Ally's poor self-esteem can easily be read as the result of years of being told that she's unintelligent and a troublemaker. Because her teachers—powerful authority figures in a young student's life—have focused entirely on Ally's behavioral issues and bad grades, this is all that Ally focuses on as well. Thanks to the focus on just the areas in which Ally does poorly, Ally never learns to value or be proud of the things she does well, like drawing. Despite the fact that she draws much of the time, Ally doesn't think of herself as being an artist and instead sees her talent for art as just another facet of her failure to be successful at school (since she often draws to escape classwork she can't complete). After years of being told she's dumb, Ally comes to believe that this is true—and hearing this is inescapable, as Ally's classmates, especially the bully Shay, never miss opportunities to remind Ally that she's the worst student in class. This shows the power of other people's narratives to shape a person's self-image, and the danger of being exposed to toxic environments and people who look for others' weaknesses before acknowledging a person's strengths.

Mr. Daniels's arrival in Ally's classroom represents a major interruption to the feedback loop that contributes to Ally's low self-esteem. He calls all of his students "fantasticos," shuts

down bullying and Shay's rude comments whenever he can, and also celebrates parts of students' identities that they didn't realize were worth celebrating, like Ally's artistic leanings, Albert's logical nature, and Oliver's ability to come up with all sorts of ideas.

As he does this, Mr. Daniels also encourages his students to be themselves. Though Ally, Keisha, and Albert discuss at several points that they don't know who they are at this point in their lives, Mr. Daniels implies through his words and actions that his students are in the middle of a perfectly normal process of discovery—and, radically for outcasts like Ally and Albert, that his students have the power to choose how to define themselves. This becomes especially powerful for Ally near the end of the school year, when Mr. Daniels conducts a history lesson in which he teaches about various celebrities and historical figures including Albert Einstein, George Washington, Whoopi Goldberg, and John F. Kennedy—all of whom are either officially identified as having or are believed to have had dyslexia. By offering these examples of famous, powerful people who changed the world in spite of or because of the same thing that keeps Ally from thinking positively about herself, Ally is able to make the final shift to thinking of her dyslexia as a superpower that makes her wonderfully different, rather than as a marker of stupidity and failure.

Once Ally is able to make this shift to becoming more confident and proud of what she can do well, she also finds that it's easier to ignore the negative things that others say about her. With this, *Fish in a Tree* brings the ideas of identity as a personal project and identity as a group effort together: by changing the stories that Ally hears, Mr. Daniels is able to teach Ally that who she is isn't a bad thing—and in turn, empowers her to choose carefully who to listen to when others speak about her, and to value her own voice over the negative voices of others.



BULLYING, FRIENDSHIP, AND SOCIAL STATUS

What Ally wants most in the world (alongside learning to read) is to have friends and to be liked by her classmates. Due to her dyslexia and the accompanying impulse control problems, Ally finds it difficult to follow social norms and is thought of as being stupid—which together turn her into a prime target for bullies like Shay. Over the course of Ally's year in Mr. Daniels's class, Ally's changing relationship with herself and with Shay, as well as the positive and affirming environment that Mr. Daniels strives to create in his classroom, work together to paint a nuanced picture of the roles that bullying and social hierarchy play in a school setting. Ultimately, *Fish in a Tree* proposes that the power one can gain through bullying is intoxicating, but is unfulfilling and unsustainable in the long run—especially in an environment where bullying is made difficult or impossible.

The classroom environment that Ally introduces the reader to first is one in which Shay and her band of bullies rule. During Mrs. Hall's baby shower, Shay and her loyal follower, Jessica, lead the charge to tease Ally about the card she gives Mrs. Hall (a sympathy card with beautiful flowers on the front, which Ally couldn't read and therefore didn't know was a sympathy card) with little pushback from the adults in the room. This event does several things. First, it shows the social consequences of Ally's dyslexia: her inability to read means that she's unwittingly unable to behave appropriately at the party, even though her intentions aren't malicious. Then, it shows how her inability to follow those social scripts turns her into an easy target for bullies, as the teachers are just as shocked as the students about the card and therefore don't shut down Shay's snide comments like they might have otherwise. For Shay, bullying Ally in this situation also helps her own social status. She's able to maintain the status as the queen bee of the class while also making it obvious to everyone else how unpopular Ally is by drawing unnecessary attention to her inappropriate card.

Even though Shay bullies Ally mercilessly throughout the novel, there are times when Ally admits that in some ways, she admires Shay. Shay is smart, wealthy, and has a number of friends, which Ally knows because Shay and her cohort all wear **friendship bracelets** that Shay made. Ally's desperate desire to be accepted and to be a part of something means that it's not hard for Shay to draw Ally into bullying others on occasion. One day at lunch, Shay invites Ally to sit at her lunch table with the express intent of roping Ally into making fun of Albert. Ally goes along with this to impress Shay, even though she knows that doing so is wrong and mean. Ally's decision to bully Albert to impress Shay speaks to the power and draw of social status and currency for someone who has none. However, Ally regrets this choice immediately and apologizes to Albert the next day, a decision that points to the novel's ultimate suggestion that popularity and power like Shay holds aren't actually worth having in the first place.

With Mr. Daniels's arrival to take Mrs. Hall's place the Monday after the baby shower, the classroom environment begins to change in such a way as to make behavior like Shay's much more difficult to pull off. Mr. Daniels makes a point to reprimand her for her rude behavior every time, while also refusing to speak poorly or negatively about students like Oliver, Ally, and Albert who often find themselves the targets of her bullying. He also talks up all his students and praises them for their kindness and strengths, habits that eventually begin to change the social structure of his classroom. This is directly responsible for cooling the animosity and cutthroat hierarchy among his students, which in turn allows Ally to make friends with Keisha and Albert and, eventually, start to humanize Shay.

Because of their friendship and the environment of Mr. Daniels's classroom, Albert, Ally, and Keisha are better equipped and feel more confident standing up to Shay

themselves. This suggests that when teachers model kindness and refuse to tolerate bullying, it in turn teaches their students to do the same. Then, possibly even more importantly, Albert's relationships with Ally and Keisha gives him the strength and a reason to stand up to the bullies that beat him up daily after school. He refuses to fight back for much of the novel, citing his pacifist beliefs, but his love for his friends means that when the bullies try to hurt Ally and Keisha, he finds himself unable to not stand up for them. This shows that what Mr. Daniels teaches his students in a school setting isn't something unique to school—it's possible and necessary to take those lessons about the power of kindness and friendship into the real world, stand up to bullies, and defend oneself and one's friends.

The final lesson for Ally, as well as Shay's downfall, comes when Ally learns that Shay doesn't give out friendship bracelets: she sells them. This makes it clear to Ally that Shay's "friendships" are fake and constructed to boost Shay's popularity—in other words, the friendships are intended to give Shay followers, not true and supportive friends. However, after Shay loses the election for class president, Ally overhears Shay's mom berating her for failing. This suggests that Shay's behavior doesn't take place in a vacuum; rather, she's behaving exactly as her parents have taught her to by prioritizing winning and superiority over kindness and friendship. Though Shay doesn't undergo a substantial change in outlook by the end of the novel, by humanizing her like this, *Fish in a Tree* offers the possibility for Shay to go on to develop a healthier outlook on social interactions thanks to teachers like Mr. Daniels—while also illustrating, through her lack of friends and diminished vitriol at the end of the novel, that bullies can be stopped when teachers interrupt the classroom hierarchy by providing other students with the tools and the support to refuse to play the bullies' games.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS

Ally enviously notes at the beginning of the novel that Shay and all of Shay's friends wear colorful friendship bracelets that Shay made. At this point, Ally sees the bracelets as being indicative of genuine friendship, mutual support, and companionship between Shay and her many friends—something that the lonely Ally is jealous of. However, later in the school year, Ally discovers that Shay is actually *selling* the bracelets—suggesting that the bracelets actually symbolize false friendship built on fear and manipulation rather than genuine friendship forged through mutual respect and appreciation. The fact that Shay believes that her "friends"

need to buy her attention and affection suggests that Shay's friendships are just as shallow and corrupted as her idea of what a friendship bracelet means.



COINS

Coins (mostly nickels) serve several symbolic purposes. Ally first sees coins as a straightforward symbol for Grandpa and Dad, who introduced her and Travis to coin collecting when they were very young. Collecting coins is a way for both Ally and Travis to connect to their deceased grandfather and deployed father, thereby remembering the importance of their familial connections. However, it takes much longer for Ally to see that because of the nature of coin collecting, coins can also act as representations of the importance and the value of diversity and difference—after all, as Travis and one pawnshop salesman point out, coins are only collectible when they're some combination of rare, flawed, or somehow different than their brethren.



SKETCHBOOK OF IMPOSSIBLE THINGS

At the beginning of the novel, Ally draws all of her mind movies in her Sketchbook of Impossible Things. She often does this to avoid having to do her difficult classwork, which turns the Sketchbook into a symbol for all that is hard or difficult in Ally's life: her inability to read, her isolation, and her poor performance in school. Most importantly, the Sketchbook represents Ally's fear and unwillingness to trust anyone else, as it's a place she goes to escape having to tell anyone that she can't read. As she works with Mr. Daniels and gradually grows more confident, she finds that she needs the Sketchbook less and less, as things that previously seemed impossible are suddenly within Ally's grasp. With this, the Sketchbook becomes a symbol of who Ally was before meeting Mr. Daniels and getting help with her dyslexia, when learning to read seemed just as fantastical as the worlds represented in her surreal drawings.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Silver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When Ally finally learns that she's in trouble for inadvertently giving Mrs. Hall a sympathy card during her baby shower, she feels horrible and admits that she made the mistake because she couldn't read the card. Ally's reaction shows first that she feels wholly unable to admit why she made this mistake, even though doing so would allow her teachers to help her. Because Ally's been allowed to believe that she's dumb and different, and because her teachers only see Ally as a troublemaker, Ally simply has no idea that teachers can actually help people.

Second, this reaction illustrates how Ally's dyslexia keeps her from properly following social scripts—such as giving appropriate cards at parties—which, in turn, makes everyone even more confused by her behavior. In other words, Ally's inability to read makes her look unintelligent and, in this case, like a mean person out to get attention, when Ally's inner monologue makes it clear that she desperately wanted to do something nice for Mrs. Hall.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ I'm so tired of this conversation. We've had it a hundred times, even though my third-grade teacher told her that I might just be slow, that my mom shouldn't expect too much of me. My mom's eyes got all wide and shiny when she heard that, and I felt sad and embarrassed for her having to be my mom.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), The Third Grade Teacher, Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

When Mom tries to talk to Ally about how Ally needs to try harder in school and stop goofing off, Ally tells the reader that her third grade teacher said that Ally was unintelligent. This offers a concrete starting point for Ally's low self-esteem and it recognizes that teachers have a lot of power to influence how their students think about themselves. By saying that Ally was slow, this teacher inadvertently made it true by giving Ally more reason to believe it. Mom's reaction also shows that this damages all of Ally's family, not just Ally.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Fish in a Tree* published in 2015.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ I stand tall, but everything inside shrinks. The thing is, I feel real bad. I mean, I felt terrible when the neighbor's dog died, never mind if a baby had died. I just didn't know it was a sad card like that. All I could see were beautiful yellow flowers. And all I could imagine was how happy I was going to make her.

Just as Ally has to work harder at school, Mom has to work harder to stand up for her daughter because Ally no longer believes in herself and her teachers seem generally unwilling to help.


Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ “Well,” the guy says, “if you know anything about coins, you know that a coin with a flaw in it is far more valuable than a regular coin.”

Something isn't right with it and it's worth more?

Related Characters: The Salesman (speaker), Grandpa, Dad, Travis, Ally

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 32



Explanation and Analysis


As Travis and the salesman at the pawnshop talk about looking at some more interesting and valuable coins, Ally latches on to the salesman's insistence that flawed coins are more valuable. With this, the novel introduces coins as a symbol for the power and the value of difference and diversity. The fact that both Dad and Grandpa were avid coin collectors and shared this hobby with their children and grandchildren suggests that both men wanted Ally and Travis to take this insight to heart, given that both of them are different—both, the novel will later reveal, have dyslexia, but both are still valuable members of their family and their community.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ As I walk back to my seat, I think of how when Dad left, he said that when we look at the steel pennies, we need to remember that we are unique, too. And also, that things will go back to normal for us—that he'll be home before we know it.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Travis, Dad

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Ally has brought a steel penny (which were made during World War Two to free up copper for ammunition) to school for show and tell. Dad gave it to Ally to remind her to take pride in her difference, thereby reinforcing the novel's insistence that coins are symbols of diversity. Here, however, Dad's comment that the penny should remind Ally that things will go back to normal (just as pennies once again were made out of copper following the war) also suggests to Ally that, at some point, things will get better for her in terms of being so different. In this way, this penny foreshadows Ally's eventual friendships with Keisha and Albert, as well as her discovery that she isn't dumb—she just has dyslexia and needs special instruction. With this, Ally becomes more “normal,” while also remaining unique and different from her classmates.

☞ Mr. Daniels gives Oliver a thumbs-up, and I think how cool it is that they have the ear-pulling signal. That way he doesn't always have to tell Oliver that he's doing something wrong in front of everyone. I know what that feels like and I'm happy that Mr. Daniels cares so much. Most teachers seem to like their students to be all the same—perfect and quiet. Mr. Daniels actually seems to like that we're different.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Oliver, Mr. Daniels

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Ally picks up on the fact that Oliver and Mr. Daniels have a signal that lets Mr. Daniels quietly tell Oliver that he needs to calm down without embarrassing Oliver. Ally recognizes that coming up with this signal is an indicator that unlike all of Ally's other teachers, Mr. Daniels understands that the social situation in his class isn't without issues—to this end, Ally notes that Oliver seems used to being publically reprimanded for talking out of turn, which then turns him into a bullying target. By redirecting Oliver's behavior quietly and without drawing attention to it, Mr. Daniels recognizes first that calling students out turns them into targets and also shows that he understands that his students aren't all the same. It recognizes that Oliver isn't in a place developmentally where he's capable of sitting quietly and perfectly like other kids his age, but through their signal, Oliver is able to feel more normal and not have his day interrupted.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ But now, on top of all those other big wishes that I carry around, I have one more. I want to impress Mr. Daniels. With every tiny little piece of myself, I just want him to like me.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mr. Daniels

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 57


Explanation and Analysis


After Ally and Mr. Daniels have a conversation about the black cube that Ally drew in her notebook, Ally realizes that she'd like to impress Mr. Daniels and have a positive relationship with him. This first shows how desperate Ally is to have a positive relationship with a teacher, as in the grand scheme of things, Mr. Daniels did the bare minimum by expressing interest in Ally's drawing and telling her that she's a valuable part of his classroom. In turn, however, this shows how valuable those bare minimum words and actions can be for someone who isn't used to hearing them. Ally is used to being told that she's a dumb troublemaker, so it's earth shattering for her to hear that someone values her and what she has to say about the world. Further, by expressing this to Ally, Mr. Daniels shows her that he's willing to work for her trust and not punish her for her differences.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ Besides that, Shay, Jessica, and some other girls all have these woven friendship bracelets. And I have never had the kind of friends who have matching bracelets, but I have always wanted them. It's like the bracelet tells the world that the person wearing it has someone who cares about them.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Jessica, Shay

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

As Ally suspiciously agrees to sit with Shay and Jessica at lunch, she admits that she agrees mostly because she wants to be a part of something and wants to have friends that exchange friendship bracelets. While Ally's assessment of

what the friendship bracelets symbolize isn't wrong, per se, she is oversimplifying what these particular friendship bracelets mean. Ally knows that Shay and Jessica are mean and even observes at times that Shay is mean to Jessica, which suggests that Ally isn't thinking critically about whether or not the bracelets mean what she thinks they do in this situation. The disconnect between what Ally sees and what she believes suggests that at this point, she's so desperate to have friends that she's willing to try spending time with people who don't actually act like friends; they simply wear the symbols of friendship.

☝ I'm not perfect, but at least I'm not mean.

And then my heart sinks, because I realize that I just was.

I guess I did it because I was lonely. Now I know that there are worse things than being lonely.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Albert, Jessica, Shay

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 63



Explanation and Analysis

After Albert walks away from Shay's bullying, Ally realizes that she was roped into bullying Albert as well and feels horrible about it. In making this connection, Ally is able to reaffirm her desire to be nice to others, even if it means not having "friends" like Shay and Jessica. This also shows that the friendship bracelets that Shay and Jessica wear aren't truly symbolic of caring and friendship, given that they don't extend their kindness and care to anyone else—and indeed, Shay also underhandedly made fun of Jessica while also bullying Albert. Most importantly, however, Ally is capable of recognizing that she was being mean and can therefore choose to act kindly in the future, knowing exactly what the alternative feels like. With this, she's able to begin to piece together her identity and decide what kind of a person she'd like to be.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ The next morning, I am trying to decide if I should turn in my paper, knowing Mr. Daniels will probably think I spit it out in two minutes. The truth is that it cost me my whole night and a headache that was so bad, it reminded me of the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* always yelling, "Off with her head!" Just because I thought that would be a relief.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mr. Daniels

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

After completing one of her first writing assignments for Mr. Daniels, Ally deliberates over whether or not to actually turn it in. Ally's thought process shows that she understands that she's a poor writer and she should, in theory, be able to do better. At this point in the novel, this gives Ally more evidence for why she's dumb, even though everything else Ally says suggests that there's more to this problem than intelligence. The splitting headache and the fact that the paper took Ally so long to write points to the possibility that this isn't an issue with just being a poor writer; Ally is actually fighting some other block to being able to write quickly and well.

It's also worth noting that nearly everything Ally says about her writing and how she goes about it is a textbook description of how many unidentified dyslexic people struggle with writing. Writing causes headaches, takes a long time, and because of Ally's dysgraphia (mixing up letters on the page) and being a poor speller (another symptom of dyslexia), her writing is still poor no matter how hard she tries. Even despite all this, it is telling that Ally chose to write her paper and is considering turning it in. This indicates that she's beginning to trust Mr. Daniels and is possibly willing to finally ask for help and admit that she's struggling.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ People act like the words “slow reader” tell them everything that's inside. Like I'm a can of soup and they can just read the list of ingredients and know everything about me. There's a lot of stuff about the soup inside that they can't put on the label, like how it smells and tastes and makes you feel warm when you eat it. There's got to be more to me than a kid who can't read well.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis



After Shay and Jessica tease Ally, Albert, and Keisha about being the Island of Misfit Toys (from the film *Rudolph the*


Red-Nosed Reindeer), Ally ponders the limits of language. When she suggests that being a slow reader doesn't tell a person everything about her, it shows that Ally's self-esteem is beginning to improve—it's proof that Ally no longer thinks of her self as being no more than a slow reader. By wondering about the limits of language at all, Ally begins to speak to the constraints of the world she lives in, which is one that, for better or for worse, prioritizes literacy and language over many other forms of communication. In other words, while Ally now seems to believe that, just like there's more to soup than what's written on a label, there's also something to be said for the fact that the label is written in the first place. This sets literacy up as a hurdle for Ally to clear, rather than simply defining herself in terms of her lack of literacy.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ Even when I do something right, I feel like I've done something wrong. If I were a coin, I'd be a wooden nickel.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mr. Daniels, Shay

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

After Ally explains the difference between “lonely” and “alone,” she still feels as though she did something wrong and excuses herself to the bathroom. Again, this speaks to the power of everything Ally has heard others say about her—the combined power of hearing for years that she's dumb is much stronger, and much truer for Ally than what she hears in Mr. Daniels's praise.

In addition to showing how much power teachers have to inadvertently cause their students to think poorly about themselves, this also shows how difficult it can be for a kind teacher like Mr. Daniels to earn a student's trust when they have such massive self-esteem issues. This begins to show that trust is something tenuous and fragile, and even though Ally desperately wants to trust Mr. Daniels and believe what he says about her, it's going to take time before she can do so without worrying that she's making a mistake.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ “Do you know what it means to think out of the box?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“It means that you are a creative thinker. You think differently than other people.”

Great. Just once, I want to be told I'm like everyone else.

“It's a good thing to be an out-of-the-box thinker. People like that are world-changers.”

Related Characters: Ally, Mr. Daniels (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis


When Mr. Daniels asks Ally to tell him about her fictional hero Roy G. Biv, a character she made up, he praises her for thinking out of the box and putting her own spin on the assignment. It's important to pay attention to how Ally mentally responds to what Mr. Daniels is saying, even though his tone doesn't indicate that she's doing something wrong. Because Ally truly believes that she's dumb, she sees her creativity as something undesirable, even when Mr. Daniels is telling her that this thinking is misguided. In turn, this indicates that at this point, Ally is the one keeping herself back by continuing to believe others when they say she's stupid, even in the face of a teacher who doesn't think that all.


When Mr. Daniels tells Ally that it's good to be an out-of-the-box thinker, he starts to try to impress upon her that, just as coins are more valuable when they're different, Ally is also valuable because she's different. She's smart, just in different ways than her classmates are.

☝ “I laugh. “Uh, no, thanks. I'd rather wear handcuffs.”

I can't believe Shay charges her friends for something that's supposed to stand for loyalty and friendship. And I can't believe they paid.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Jessica, Shay

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

When Ally learns that Shay sells friendship bracelets to her “friends” rather than gives them away, she's shocked. Ally recognizes at this point that Shay isn't actually the popular, well-liked girl that Ally thought she was. By realizing that the symbol of the friendship bracelets is actually corrupted, the bracelets come to resemble handcuffs more than they stand as a marker of friendship. This allows Ally to go on to begin to pick out instances in which it seems as though Shay's followers only follow her because they're scared, or don't actually want to follow her at all.

Though Ally never fully reaches the conclusion of this, this all suggests that everyone in Ally's class is just as capable of feeling lonely and alone as she is. Unlike her, some of the other girls are simply willing to experiment with being mean and buying Shay's affection to try to fit in, rather than existing as an island like Ally does.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝ It comes from a place so deep inside, it's like it's coming out of the ground. “I just... I just want to fit in for once. I mean, I really do. Just to be the same as everyone else.”

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Keisha

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

From the safety of a bathroom stall, Ally confides in Keisha that she wants to be like everyone else. Ally's reasoning has several facets. First, it's important to recognize that Ally's learning disabilities do make it much harder for her to succeed in school, something that, as far as she's concerned, the rest of her class is able to do easily. This means that Ally already feels inferior. Second, because Ally has these disabilities and the rest of her class knows it (and has bullies like Shay in it), Ally is victimized for her struggles in a way that continuously beats at her self-esteem, making it even harder for her to ever feel good about herself. Finally, Ally has also not been told much that it's a good thing to be different. Though Dad and Grandpa tried to tell her this through the way they spoke about coin collecting, and despite Mr. Daniels's attempts to tell Ally that thinking differently and creatively are valuable skills, Ally doesn't yet have any reason to believe them. At this point, she's seen little proof that thinking differently leads to anything but

shame, sorrow, and more bullying.

☝ “You are smart, Ally. And you are going to learn to read.”

A chill runs through my whole body. I don't have any choice but to believe him, because I can't go another day thinking things will be like this forever.

Related Characters: Mr. Daniels (speaker), Ally

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 158



Explanation and Analysis

After hearing from Mr. Daniels that she might have dyslexia, Ally clings to his promise that she can learn to read. Her willingness to believe Mr. Daniels speaks to just how horribly Ally feels about herself and her situation, the result of years of bullying at the hands of classmates and a lack of understanding from her teachers. However, when Ally says that she can't think like this forever, it shows that she's finally willing to trust Mr. Daniels and see if he can actually help her. This points to the power of the trusting relationship they're developing, as Ally has never been given a reason to truly trust a teacher before. Choosing to trust Mr. Daniels shows that Ally is finally ready to do the scary thing, put herself out there, and admit that she needs help.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝ I walk over to the garbage and drop it in. Watch it twist and spin as it falls. I look up and lock eyes with him and wish I had the words to tell him how grateful I am for his helping me. In this world of words, sometimes they just can't say everything.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mr. Daniels

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis


Mr. Daniels conducts an exercise of splitting the “im” from “impossible” and having Ally throw the “im” away as a way of showing that anything is possible. After this, Ally feels grateful for his help and encouragement. This is a major turning point in Ally's sense of self as well as in her relationship with Mr. Daniels. Compared to how she thought about teachers at the beginning of the novel, being

grateful to a teacher for helping her—and too grateful to speak—shows that she's completely reevaluated how she thinks about teachers and what role they can play in her life. Now, she sees them as people who can help her—not just people who dole out punishment. Then, when she notes that words can't say everything even though her world relies on words, Ally again points at the limits and constraints of the world she lives in. This becomes another moment of recognition that while learning to read is an important skill that will help Ally move through the world, it's not the end-all, be-all, and Ally is still a valuable person even with her reading struggles.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☝ “People ask what you want to be when you grow up. I know what kind of grown-up I want to be. But I don't know who I am now.” Albert stretches his legs out. “There are always people ready to tell you who you are, like a nerd or a jerk or a wimp.”

Related Characters: Albert (speaker), Keisha, Ally

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 183-84

Explanation and Analysis

Albert is thinking out loud about the wisdom of the phrase “be yourself,” especially as it applies to teens and tweens who don't know who they are. When Albert mentions that there are always others who are willing to put an identity on him, he shows that he recognizes the power of other people's stories to influence how one thinks about oneself. This provides some explanation for why Ally, for example, has such low self-esteem: most of what she's been told about herself is that she's unintelligent and difficult, and at the beginning of the novel, she believed that this was true. Though Albert doesn't say it out right, he does imply here that listening to the other people saying mean things isn't something he and his friends should be doing. Even though they might not know who they are right now, he still understands that it can be a dangerous proposition to put too much stock in what others who don't have his best interests at heart say.

☝ And I think of words. The power they have. How they can be waved around like a wand—sometimes for good, like how Mr. Daniels uses them. How he makes kids like me and Oliver feel better about ourselves. And how words can also be used for bad. To hurt.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Oliver, Mr. Daniels, Keisha, Albert

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis


After Albert points out that some animals aren't actually aggressive—rather, their names just scare people—Ally continues to question how language functions to make things true. She sees now that teachers before Mr. Daniels haven't used their words to make good things true. Oliver has presumably spent his school career being told that he's too loud and boisterous, while Ally has actually been told that she's slow and can't learn. In both cases, Oliver and Ally's self-esteem suffers greatly when they're told these things, as it encourages them to think poorly of themselves.

On the other hand, Mr. Daniels's habit of trying to make his students celebrate their differences and providing extra help (as in his ear-pulling signal with Oliver and tutoring Ally) means that his students can start to see that their differences don't actually make them bad people. In other words, by simply talking about his students' differences in a more positive way, Mr. Daniels is able to change how his students feel about themselves for the better, thereby illustrating the power of kindness and careful word choice.

Chapter 37 Quotes

☝☝ I guess maybe “I'm having trouble” is not the same as “I can't.”

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mr. Daniels

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Following a challenging logic problem, Mr. Daniels tries to impress upon the class that half of what the challenge was meant to teach them was the value of working hard. For Ally—the only student who solves the problem independently—this shows her that struggling with something doesn't mean she can't do it; it just means she has to work harder at it.


When Ally is able to make this connection, it implies that she'll then be able to apply this lesson to her reading struggles. As her time with Mr. Daniels thus far has surely

taught her, being a slow reader who has to work very hard doesn't mean that she can't read. She will soon go on to read a chapter book without help, something that was unthinkable before Mr. Daniels's lessons. In this way, Mr. Daniels's wisdom here takes on even more meaning: “I'm having trouble” can, with work, eventually disappear.

☝☝ Shay sounds like someone completely different. The Shay I know, always so quick to pick a fight, now has a voice that sounds like a kindergartener.

“Sorry, Mama.” She brushes a tear from her cheek.

Related Characters: Shay, Ally (speaker), Shay's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 209-10

Explanation and Analysis

The afternoon after Shay loses the election for class president, Ally and Keisha hear Shay's mom berating her daughter for her failure. Seeing this allows Ally to understand that Shay isn't a bully just because she wants to be one; she's likely just behaving as her parents have taught her to by prioritizing winning, money, and prestige above all else. This suggests that bullies like Shay don't exist in a vacuum, which in turn humanizes Shay and makes it possible to empathize with her. It leaves open the possibility that Shay feels just as lonely and insecure as Ally does; she may just be going about trying to remedy that in different—and objectively less kind and less healthy—ways.

Chapter 42 Quotes

☝☝ Normally, I'd be giving him all kinds of reasons I can't do this. But the thing is, Mr. Daniels could hand me a book as heavy as a boulder and I'd try to read it.

Just because he asked me to.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Mr. Daniels

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis



When Mr. Daniels asks Ally to try to read a chapter book, she chooses to accept his challenge because she trusts Mr. Daniels and wants to impress him. This desire to try for Mr.


Daniels shows how much Ally now relies on him, a sharp difference with how she looked at teachers at the start of the novel. Because Mr. Daniels has treated Ally with unconditional positive regard and bolstered her confidence in herself, she now feels as though she could try anything. This suggests that Ally now trusts that if she does fail at reading this book (or one that's heavy as a boulder), she doesn't fear the consequences the same way she used to. Now, she understands that if she does have trouble, she can ask for help, and that doing so isn't a failure. Taken together, Ally's new outlook suggests that when teachers treat their students like this, tell them they can be successful, and give them challenges that are appropriate to where they are in the learning process, students can in turn become more confident in their own abilities and in their safety if they fail.

Chapter 45 Quotes

☝☝ As I draw, I think about my sketchbook and how I love it but don't draw in it as much anymore. It used to be the only thing that made me happy. Now I have other things, too.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

As Ally draws in her Sketchbook of Impossible Things, she realizes that the sketchbook was a crutch—and now, she doesn't need it. This is all thanks to the ways in which Mr. Daniels has bolstered Ally's self-esteem and changed the social environment in his classroom, both of which mean that Ally has had several months in which she hasn't feared Shay's bullying quite as much and now feels more confident in herself.

More importantly, no longer needing to rely on the Sketchbook of Impossible Things shows that what Ally once that was impossible is now possible. While the sketchbook used to be the place where Ally drew fantastical situations when she needed to escape from seemingly impossible tasks in her real life, there are now few things that seem truly impossible in her real life. She's learning to read, is presumably also improving her writing, and her social standing in school has improved dramatically. This means that she no longer has to rely on a fantasy land and instead, can draw on her friends and classmates when things are

difficult.

Chapter 48 Quotes

☝☝ And looking around the room, I remember thinking that my reading differences were like dragging a concrete block around every day, and how I felt sorry for myself. Now I realize that everyone has their own blocks to drag around. And they all feel heavy.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), Shay, Oliver, Mr. Daniels

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

After Ally learns that Oliver thinks having his letters move around like Ally's do would make reading more interesting, she begins to understand that all of her classmates have problems that, to them, seem insurmountable. With this, Ally moves another step forward in her coming of age process as she begins to recognize that she's not the only person in the world with problems. While she's certainly able to make this leap in part because her own problems now seem much more manageable, it's also a mark of maturity to be able to think this way about others and humanize them. This means that Ally no longer sees Oliver as just a kid with impulse control; he's funny and has good ideas. Shay too may seem more human, especially now that Ally has seen Shay's mom berating her for losing the election. This indicates that Shay also has problems that likely feel heavy and insurmountable—and those issues don't go away just because Shay's family is wealthy.

Chapter 50 Quotes

☝☝ I feel like I'm going to cry. Thinking how Albert has come to school every day with those bruises for all this time. We always asked him what it would take for him to fight back. Turns out it was protecting us.

Related Characters: Ally (speaker), The Bullies, Keisha, Albert

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 256



Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of Albert's fight with the bullies, Ally is shaken to realize that Albert wasn't willing to stand up for himself—but he was willing to stand up for his friends. Albert's willingness to fight to protect Ally and Keisha illustrates the power of friendship to change a person for the better. This becomes a major turning point for Albert in terms of self-esteem, as he now knows that he is capable of standing up for himself and for what's right. While the novel ends before the reader gets to see Albert develop much further, Ally does go on to observe in the hours after the fight that Albert seems taller and happier than usual, which suggests that being willing to carve out one's place in the world and stand up for being treated kindly can fundamentally change how a person thinks about themselves and their place in the world.

Chapter 51 Quotes

☝☝ I want you to know how sorry I am about the bumpy road we had for a while. I'm proud of all the strides you're making. All the hard work you're doing. We should have picked up on your learning differences before, but you were so bright... and, well, I hope you'll give me another chance to help.

Related Characters: Mrs. Silver (speaker), Ally

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

When Ally goes to Mrs. Silver's office with a note from Mr. Daniels, Mrs. Silver apologizes for not identifying Ally's dyslexia sooner. This apology attempts to encapsulate some of the issues facing dyslexic students in the school system and suggests that the issue isn't the student themselves; it's the teachers and administrators failing to identify these learning differences who are at fault. Like Ally, many dyslexic students are extremely bright, which can make identifying the dyslexia far more difficult than it might be otherwise.

Mrs. Silver's choice to apologize shows first that she recognizes where she went wrong and, hopefully for other students like Ally in the future, she'll think of testing before simply punishing students. It also offers another example of a teacher who truly believes in her students and is willing to make amends for where they went wrong, which is necessary if teachers wish to truly serve their students with learning differences and disabilities.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: IN TROUBLE AGAIN

Mrs. Hall stands in front of Ally's desk, encouraging her to finish her page of writing about herself for her new teacher. Ally brushes off Mrs. Hall's insistences that Ally can do it, asking if Mrs. Hall would say the same thing if Ally were going to climb a tree using her teeth. Shay groans that Ally should act normally, Oliver throws himself on his desk laughing, and Albert, a bulky kid wearing a t-shirt that reads "Flint," sits up straight. Ally would rather write about vomiting at a birthday party than about herself.

Mrs. Hall reminds Ally that if she weren't drawing all the time, she could get her work done. Ally slides her drawings of being shot out of a cannon away and explains to the reader that she can't win. She's been to seven schools in seven years and at every one, she does her best—but her teachers say she doesn't try hard enough, is too messy, and is a careless speller. Ally always gets headaches looking at words on pages and often spells words differently on the same page.

The rest of the class starts to sigh. Ally knows that they're all thinking that she's a dumb freak and wonders why Mrs. Hall won't let her off the hook like she usually does. Ally tries to stall by asking Mrs. Hall if she's decided what to name her soon-to-be-born baby, but Mrs. Hall won't answer. Ally watches a "mind movie" of Mrs. Hall, dressed as a sheriff, drawing a line in the dirt between herself and Ally, who's dressed as a prisoner. Ally explains that these mind movies happen all the time and they offer her an escape from real life.

Ally picks up her pencil and scribbles all over her desk, and then explains to a flabbergasted Mrs. Hall that the scribbles were there when she sat down. Kids start laughing and Shay whispers loudly that Ally is a freak. Mrs. Hall sends Ally to the office but when Ally pleads to stay, Mrs. Hall seats her at the reading table. While Mrs. Hall cleans the desk, Ally squints at her paper and writes "Why?" over and over again, hoping that someone can answer the question.

It's telling that Ally shares that she'd rather write about something objectively uncomfortable and embarrassing rather than write about herself. This suggests that Ally doesn't think very highly of herself. When the other kids laugh at her, it implies that Ally might often get attention for behaving like this.



Here, all of what Ally says about how she continues to try in school and just can't seem to win suggests that there's more going on than just being a troublemaker. Her drawing, meanwhile, is likely much easier for her, which shows both how Ally uses drawing to escape and that she is good at something.



When Ally believes her classmates are thinking that she's a dumb freak, it tells the reader that Ally has likely heard this spoken many times—in other words, she no longer needs to hear them say it to know what they're thinking. This sets Ally up as a target of bullying, which likely makes her schoolwork even harder since she knows she'll be teased for her struggles.



Again, Ally's behavior here indicates that what she's being asked to do is likely very difficult for her, and that she's not acting out just to cause trouble. Especially since she mentioned that writing and reading give her headaches, the reader can tell that she's just trying to avoid pain—a perfectly reasonable thing to do.



CHAPTER 2: YELLOW CARD

Jessica brings a huge bouquet of flowers for Mrs. Hall's baby shower, while Max gives her a package of diapers. Ally thinks that her card, which has a picture of yellow roses, is better than the bouquet since it won't dry up. Mrs. Hall slides Ally's card out and hesitates as she reads it. Ally feels proud to have done something nice, but is confused when her principal, Mrs. Silver, looks at the card and then motions for Ally to follow her out of the room. Shay gets up to look at the card, laughs, and says that Ally gets dumber every time she says something.

Shay and Jessica laugh and ignore Mrs. Hall's admonitions while Ally wonders why she isn't used to this. Keisha, the new girl, tells Shay to mind her own business and the two argue for a few minutes. Max roots for a fight, Mrs. Hall tries to calm the room, and Suki takes out one of her wooden blocks that she only plays with when she gets nervous. Ally has no idea what's going on but follows Mrs. Silver into the hall.

Mrs. Silver tells Ally that this is beyond inappropriate and a bad way to get attention. Ally puts her hands in her pockets as Oliver bursts out of the room to confusingly say that Ally must've given Mrs. Hall the card because she's sorry that Mrs. Hall is leaving to have her baby. Mrs. Silver sends Oliver on his way and then asks Ally why she'd give a pregnant woman a sympathy card. Ally feels herself shrinking as she remembers that Mom sends those to people when their loved ones die. She thinks that she should say she doesn't know what a sympathy card is but says nothing. Ally didn't know it was a sad card because she can't read, but she can't tell anyone.

The fact that Ally believes she's doing something nice for Mrs. Hall shows that she's not a bad kid, as Mrs. Hall might believe. She is kind and wants to show it, but her undiagnosed dyslexia means that she can't follow social scripts, such as how to buy an appropriate card. This offers more reasoning for why Ally is bullied, since she likely looks out of touch in other situations as well.



Notice that both Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Silver don't make an effort to truly shut down Shay and Jessica's bullying. This is in part because they're just as shocked by the card as Shay is, though it also suggests that Mrs. Hall in particular doesn't have great classroom management skills.



Because Ally can't read, she's shut out of all sorts of social things that require reading—think parties like this one, as well as ordering off menus in restaurants and even using social media. In this way, Ally's dyslexia isolates her and keeps her from appearing normal to people like Shay, who is a bully and has no interest in getting to know Ally. Pay attention to Oliver, however; his generous reading of the situation suggests that he's kinder than he's given credit for.



CHAPTER 3: NEVER UP TO ME

Mrs. Silver asks Ally if she has anything to say, but Ally stays silent. Eventually, Mrs. Silver leads Ally to her office. Ally sits, wonders what relaxing at school would be like, and wishes she had her **Sketchbook of Impossible Things**. There, she draws her mind movies. Mrs. Silver pulls Ally back to reality and reminds her that she's been in the office too much for only having been at school five months and tells Ally that it's up to her to make changes. Ally knows this isn't true, but she can't bring herself to admit her shame and tell the truth.

Wondering what it's like to relax at school shows another toll of struggling with an undiagnosed reading disability: school is a fundamentally anxiety inducing experience, as Ally knows that without help of some sort, she can't succeed. By telling Ally that it's up to her to change, Mrs. Silver shows that she doesn't think that Ally is struggling and needs help.



At Mrs. Silver's prodding, Ally admits that she wasn't trying to be funny and didn't want to hurt Mrs. Hall, but she stops short of telling the truth when she sees how disappointed Mrs. Silver looks. Ally believes she's dumb and beyond help, and after seven schools she knows it's best to be quiet. Mrs. Silver notices Ally's hands balling into fists and asks Ally to say what's wrong so that they can help her. Ally mumbles that nobody can help her.

Mrs. Silver points to a poster with two hands reaching for each other with words underneath and asks Ally to read it. Ally refuses, since she knows it'd take her a long time. She bluffs that she knows what the poster is talking about and wishes she could read when Mrs. Silver suggests she work on it, whatever "it" is.

The bell rings. Mrs. Silver says that Ally has crossed a line and when Mr. Daniels arrives on Monday, Ally needs to avoid negative consequences. Ally thinks this is impossible. As she stands to leave, Ally looks at the poster and again wishes she knew what it said. She races back to Mrs. Hall's classroom to apologize but when she sees the sad look on Mrs. Hall's face, Ally freezes. After a moment, Ally runs away. She misses her bus but feels she deserves to walk home alone.

CHAPTER 4: BIRD IN A CAGE

Ally walks all the way to where Mom works, a restaurant called A. C. Petersen Farms. Mom is worried that Ally is late but tells her to sit at the counter and do her homework. She says that the school called her about the baby shower incident but instead of sounding mad, Mom sounds sad. Ally looks at a tray of ice cream, imagines drawing rivers of ice cream, and miserably apologizes when Mom calls her back to reality. Ally says she thought Mrs. Hall would like the card. Mom is incredulous.

Ally opens her book and wonders how other people can read the dancing letters. Instead of doing her homework, she imagines dinosaurs drinking coffee and watching a meteor head towards earth. She grabs a napkin and starts to draw so she can put it in the **Sketchbook of Impossible Things** later.

The choice to not tell Mrs. Silver the truth betrays that at this point, Ally doesn't see teachers or administrators as trustworthy or being on her side. As far as she's concerned, they're out to get her, ask her to do impossible things, and punish her when she fails.



When Ally can bluff her way through this, it tells the reader that she is smart and adept at getting through these social situations. She's become a great actress, though this is only because she's too afraid to admit she needs help.



Just as Ally chose not to confide in Mrs. Silver when she saw her disappointment, Mrs. Hall's sadness here only makes Ally feel worse about her behavior and even more alone. These two teachers then stand as an example of what a teacher should not do: judge a student before understanding why they did what they did.



Mom's reaction to what happened suggests that like Ally's teachers, she also believes that Ally is doing this on purpose. This shows that all the adults in Ally's life are failing her by not considering other explanations for her poor behavior and school performance, and reinforces the dependence that children have on adults to help them succeed.



Because Ally believes that she's dumb, she also believes that everyone sees letters that move like she does—which, per her logic, means that she's somehow less capable than her classmates, not just different.



Soon, Ally notices Mom in front of her. Ally looks up and explains that she didn't know the card was a sympathy card. Mom laughs and compliments Ally's napkin drawing. She says that Grandpa would be proud of how hard Ally is working on her art, and that he'd also be thrilled that she named the **Sketchbook of Impossible Things** after *Alice in Wonderland*. Mom reminisces that Grandpa loved sharing that book with her and with Ally, and Ally thinks the world in that book makes perfect sense to her. They sadly admit that they miss Grandpa.

Ally hears Shay and Jessica come into the restaurant. Shay feigns concern that Ally didn't return to class, and Ally tries to make Mom be quiet when Mom suggests the girls sit together. Shay and Jessica finally sit at the bar a few seats away and surreptitiously mock Ally. Mom takes their ice cream orders and though Jessica orders strawberry, she changes her order to chocolate after Shay orders chocolate.

While Mom is in the kitchen, Jessica and Shay laugh that Ally's mom is a waitress. Shay says that Ally could be a waitress if she could read the ice cream flavors. Ally flushes, afraid they know her secret. She remembers reading aloud after she first moved here. She'd misread that macaroni swim 20 miles per hour, not manatees, and when everyone laughed, she pretended she'd said it on purpose.

Ally sneaks into the back room and hides behind a shelf of cans and bottles. She looks at the labels and thinks she can never get away from words. Ally remembers how, in second grade, her teacher wrote something and asked her what it said. As usual, Ally didn't know, but she felt humiliated when the teacher said it was her name. Ally tries not to cry as Mom appears. Ally won't say what's wrong, since she knows how happy it made Mom to think that she has friends. Ally goes back to the counter and wonders if this year is going to be the worst ever.

The Sketchbook of Impossible Things is a way for Ally to escape from reality by drawing things that are just as fantastical as what one might find in Alice in Wonderland. This then speaks to Ally's sense of alienation in the real world she inhabits, since due to not being able to read, her world seems just as nonsensical to her as Wonderland did to Alice.



Jessica's choice to change her order speaks to the degree to which she idolizes Shay and wants to emulate her in every way possible. In doing so, Jessica subsumes her own identity and denies herself the opportunity to ever experiment and come to her own conclusions.



Ally will later discover that her inability to read is no secret to her classmates; what matters, however, is who cares (Shay) and who doesn't. Shay's insult about Mom shows that what Shay prioritizes most is money, as being a waitress is historically a job that pays poorly.



This moment shows that Ally wants desperately to be normal, if only to make Mom happy. Her loneliness and sense that she's not normal is a result of not being able to read, which points to the degree to which inclusion in society rests on a person's ability to appear "normal."



CHAPTER 5: SILVER DOLLARS AND WOODEN NICKELS

Later that evening, Ally feels instantly better when Travis walks in, smelling of grease. He says he had a "**silver dollar** day," and Ally explains that in her family, they have silver dollar days (good days) or wooden nickel days (bad days). Travis says he finished restoring an old Coke machine and found an old gumball machine to fix up. He says that soon he'll have his shop, Nickerson Restoration, but then deflates and says he just has to get out of school first.

When Travis mentions school with such a deflated attitude, it suggests that he may be struggling with some of the same things as Ally. This shows that there's a good chance that nothing will change for Ally, given that Travis is in high school and still hasn't been identified or received help.



Mom gets home later and immediately turns off the TV. She says that she's trying to be patient, but she's getting tired of Ally's behavior. Ally counters that everyone hates her and tells the reader that being funny when you don't mean to be is awful. Mom reminds Ally that school is important and it's time to stop goofing off and act as smart as she is, but Ally insists that she's not that smart. Ally remembers her third grade teacher saying she was just slow and is mostly glad that Mom doesn't believe her.

Mom says seriously that Ally needs to buckle down and make a better effort. Ally agrees to do so, but it feels like a lie. Mom sends Ally to take a bath and calls after Ally that *nobody* could hate her. Ally wishes Mom could understand her world.

CHAPTER 6: TRIPLE-SIDED COIN

Travis and Ally enter a pawnshop. It smells like old memories of Dad and Grandpa taking Travis and Ally out looking for **coins**. The salesman doesn't say hello and doesn't take Travis seriously when he says he wants to buy coins. Travis does what Dad said to never do and shows the man a wad of bills. The man's eyes widen and Travis asks for liberty coins. The man pulls out several. Ally recognizes one of the dimes, but Travis asks to see more unusual coins.

The salesman pulls out a very small penny. Travis inspects it and asks for a price. The man reminds Travis that a **coin** with a flaw is more valuable than a regular coin, an idea that shocks Ally. He then says he'll sell the penny for \$75. Travis smiles, which Ally tells the reader is a bad move, but Travis points out that the "special penny" is just a regular one dipped in nitric acid. The man stops smiling and at Travis's request, pulls out a 1933 Walking Liberty half-dollar. Travis negotiates to buy the half-dollar along with the dime that Ally recognized.

Ally is elated as she accepts the dime outside the shop. Travis explains that both **coins** were minted in 1933, the year of Grandpa's birth. As they get in the car, Travis says that the salesman tried to rip him off, but Travis was able to use the man's low expectations to his advantage. He points to Ally and says that the trick is to not have low expectations of *oneself*. Ally nods but thinks it's not hard to think ill of herself.

The only way that Ally sees to stay afloat is to play along when she makes mistakes that others find funny, which is how she starts to look like a jokester and a troublemaker to her teachers. However, she implies here that every instance where this happens is deeply embarrassing, which shows that even though Ally is doing something that could help her socially, it never actually does.



Again, when Mom isn't willing to look at other reasons why Ally might be behaving like this, it traps Ally in this cycle of promising to do better that, in the end, just makes her feel hopeless.



Even if Travis is fighting the same battles that Ally is, he shows here that he knows how flip some of the social scripts and use them to his advantage. In this way, he becomes an example for Ally to show her that behaving differently isn't necessarily a bad thing; it can bring about some interesting results.



The idea that flawed coins are more valuable than regular coins introduces Ally to the idea that difference can be good, powerful, and something to be proud of. By linking this idea to Dad and Grandpa, two figures who aren't around right now, it suggests that Ally may have mentors and cheerleaders in the abstract. However, those cheerleaders can't help her when they're not around to advocate for her. This scene also shows Travis's innate intelligence, even if he struggles in school as Ally does.



Again, Travis's pep talk shows that he's figured out how to, in some situations, use his "flaws" to his advantage, something that Ally hasn't learned yet. With this, Travis becomes another cheerleader for Ally, albeit one who also struggles with reading and therefore, can't advocate for the help she needs yet.



CHAPTER 7: NO GRANDPAS HERE

On Sunday night Ally sits on her bed, holding the old copy of *Alice in Wonderland* that Grandpa gave her. Though the print is bigger than usual, Ally still can't read it. She feels heavy at the thought of having to go back to school and hopes that her new teacher, Mr. Daniels, will be a friendly grandfatherly type.

Mr. Daniels turns out to be young, with a dark jacket and a tie with planets on it. Kids surround him, and Ally hears him telling them that they can memorize the planets by remembering, "my very excellent mother just served us nachos." Ally notices that Albert's arms are covered in bruises as he says that he feels bad for Pluto after it was demoted to a dwarf planet. Ally says that Pluto probably doesn't care and secretly wants to ask how Albert got his bruises.

Ally sits down and vows to do better and work harder, even though she knows it won't work. She thinks that if *trying* to read actually helped, she'd be a genius. Suddenly, she notices Mr. Daniels in front of her with his hand held out. He introduces himself to her, causing Shay, Jessica, and their friends to laugh and say that he must not know about Ally. Mr. Daniels tells Shay that her behavior isn't acceptable, which wipes away her smile. Mr. Daniels turns back to Ally, who quietly introduces herself and wonders what Mrs. Silver told him about her. He calls the class to attention by calling them "fantasticos," but Ally is lost in a mind movie of being tied to train tracks.

CHAPTER 8: REAL TROUBLE

Ally's day starts out well since they do mental math exercises in the morning and she's good at that. She explains to the reader that she used to love math but now it has letters and story problems, which she can't read and can't solve. Her day goes downhill during snack time when Mr. Daniels calls Ally to his desk and asks her to tell him what her paper filled with "why?" means. Ally refuses to answer and refuses to write a paragraph about herself, reasoning that he doesn't want to know anyway.

Mr. Daniels asks if Ally doesn't like writing and finds it difficult. She thinks about her answer carefully and decides it's safest to say that writing is easy but boring. She also says that she likes math and drawing. Mr. Daniels says that he's spoken with Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Silver, and knows that Ally spends a lot of time in the office. He says that he's going to try his best to not send her to the office; they can deal with problems together. Ally panics inside; the office was her "get out of jail free" card. Mr. Daniels also assures Ally that he's on her side and wants to help, but Ally thinks he doesn't know what he's getting into.

For Ally, books are impossible and represent whole worlds that she cannot open. Again, this shows just how much of the world Ally can't experience just because of her dyslexia.



A common symptom of dyslexia is not being able to separate words into individual letters or sounds, which likely makes a mnemonic device like Mr. Daniels is talking about seem even stranger to her. Ally's curiosity about Albert's bruises shows that she is a kind person, but her insecurity keeps her from actively caring for others.



By reprimanding Shay immediately, Mr. Daniels shows that he's not willing to put up with her brand of bullying in his classroom. This will, in time, make it safer for students like Ally to try new things without fearing persecution from their classmates. This shows that when it comes to reaching students like Ally, a teacher's first step should be to put a stop to the nasty social structures that make school even more stressful than it already is.



Reasoning that Mr. Daniels doesn't care about her is one way for Ally to protect herself in what to her seems like a dog-eat-dog world. She's never had a reason to believe that teachers care about her and are actually interested, therefore, she has no reason to try this time.



Mr. Daniels's line of questioning implies that he suspects that there may be more to Ally's refusal than just wanting to cause trouble. Though Ally is too on-guard to realize it, this means that Mr. Daniels is the first person thus far who has looked beyond who she appears to be to see if there's a problem. With this, Mr. Daniels marks himself as a caring educator who wants to see his students as people first.



CHAPTER 9: BAG FULL OF NOTHING

Ally says that their assignment was to bring in something that represents them and to tell the class about it. Ally considered bringing a can of dirt or a bag of nothing. Shay goes first and talks about her horse. Jessica shows the class a picture of Shay, and Oliver brings a light bulb. As he bounces, he excitedly explains that his dad is a lamp salesman and when he grows up, he wants to sell hangers—everyone needs hangers. Mr. Daniels tells Oliver he's clever, which Ally thinks Oliver probably hasn't heard before. Oliver falls into his chair and cheers for himself.

Albert gets up, covered in bruises and wearing a shirt with "Flint" on it, as he does every day. He pulls out a jar of clear liquid, which he says is a mixture of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, and drinks it. Shay whispers meanly with Jessica, and Ally explains that Shay has gotten sneakier about being mean since Mr. Daniels took away her recess for making fun of Oliver. Albert explains that he drank water—the exact water was around when there were dinosaurs. He then shocks the class by saying it came from his kitchen. He says that as a scientist and a historian, it's important to understand that humans are insignificant in the grand scheme of the world. Kids groan, but Mr. Daniels makes them stop.

Keisha goes next and takes out a homemade cupcake. Shay whispers that the cupcake isn't decorated, and cupcakes aren't that cool, but Mr. Daniels tells her to be constructive. Smiling, Keisha cuts her cupcake in half to reveal the word "yum" on the inside. Suki, who seldom speaks, asks how Keisha did it, and Keisha explains that she stands dough letters up in the cupcake batter. Oliver asks if she licks the spoon and begins to talk about how his mom doesn't want him to have too much sugar, but he stops when Mr. Daniels says Oliver's name and pulls on his own ear.

Keisha says she's going to call her baking business "Hidden Messages," and Mr. Daniels says the possibilities are infinite. At this, Albert raises his hand and explains why the possibilities aren't actually infinite, as Keisha would eventually run out of letter combinations. Mr. Daniels says that Albert is right from a mathematical standpoint, but it's impossible to measure how hard Keisha will work or her creativity. Albert insists that the measurable parts are the most important, and Mr. Daniels happily says they'll need to agree to disagree.

Again, Ally's ideas for what to bring show that she doesn't think well of herself at all—and keep in mind that this is mostly because Ally doesn't hear from her teachers that she's smart or valuable. When Mr. Daniels praises Oliver and Ally thinks this is a new thing for Oliver, it suggests that she and Oliver may have more in common than Ally realizes.



Shay's desire to continue to bully others is a clue that her popularity doesn't come from actually being liked and popular; it comes from making others fear her. When Ally notes that Mr. Daniels is taking a hard line against her bullying, it shows how a teacher can both be trying to do the right thing and still fail at doing it effectively. However, it's telling that Mr. Daniels calls kids out on their rude behavior publically, as it shows that he values kindness.



Notice that, aside from Shay's snide comments, the kids who respond to Keisha are ones who were previously silent or undervalued. This suggests that even if Mr. Daniels's attempts to curb Shay's meanness aren't entirely effective, the tenor of the class is starting to change to become more open, accepting, and kind.



By not shutting Albert down immediately, Mr. Daniels is able to show Albert that his opinion (and the brains it takes to get to his opinion) are valid and valuable. Through making room for these differing opinions, Mr. Daniels can tell his students that he values how different they all are and how differently they think about the problems before them.



Suki goes next and passes out a paper bag to each of her classmates. They contain two Japanese foods that she says might be spicy. Max, Keisha, and Jessica run to the sink for water after eating the wasabi pea, while Albert says with a pained look that it's good. Oliver eats his with no reaction and starts to talk about his parents saying he has no taste buds but stops when Mr. Daniels pulls on his earlobe. Ally wonders how hard it is to learn a second language as Suki explains that she used to share these foods with her grandfather in Japan. She says her grandfather carved her wooden blocks and explains that the crackers are made of shrimp and fish bones. When Shay imperiously says that her family prefers lobster, Albert says that lobster used to be served only to peasants and slaves.

Though it's unclear whether or not Albert realizes that he's actually standing up for Suki (or if he just wants to share what he knows), pointing out that lobster used to be a meal reserved for the poor illustrates how the environment that Mr. Daniels is creating makes it acceptable and encouraged to stand up for others like this. By allowing Albert to make this statement, Mr. Daniels can again show Albert that he values his opinions, while also allow his students to do some of the work of policing each other's tone and intent.



Ally is next. She initially pretends she forgot to bring something and says she can't even talk about a pet, since Mom is allergic. Mr. Daniels encourages her to share anything. Finally, Ally pulls a 1943 steel penny out of her pocket. She explains that Dad gave both her and Travis steel pennies when he was deployed, and says the pennies are steel because the government needed copper to make ammunition during World War Two. Mr. Daniels praises Ally for sharing. Ally thinks about how Dad always told her that the steel pennies should be reminders of her uniqueness and that things will go back to normal. She notices Mr. Daniels giving Oliver a thumbs-up and thinks their secret signal is cool. Ally thinks that Mr. Daniels is excited that his students are different.

The signal that Mr. Daniels has with Oliver could suggest that Oliver has a formal intervention plan for a behavior issue. This indicates that it's possible for students like Oliver and Ally, who require different modes of instruction to effectively learn, to be successful in school—if they (or their parents) can ask for help.



CHAPTER 10: PROMISES, PROMISES...

Mr. Daniels announces that he's going to talk about books. Ally enjoys it when he does this; she just doesn't want to read them. Then, he holds up a stack of notebooks and explains that there's one for each student to write in every day. Ally knows she'll hate this, but then Mr. Daniels says he'll never correct them and the students can write about what they want. Ally is perplexed and knows there must be a catch. She's right; there are rules: they have to write something, and Mr. Daniels says he'll write back.

Again, Ally's distrustful nature when it comes to teachers is a result of years of having no reason to trust her teachers. This illustrates the amount of damage that a teacher can inflict on a child by not meeting them where they are, as it then puts a student further behind as they continue through school.



Max and Oliver ask clarifying questions and Ally receives a yellow notebook. They all begin to write. Ally notices Suki holding one of her blocks and wonders if she's thinking about her grandfather. Ally sees a mind movie of being in a forest of alphabet blocks. She considers drawing that but colors a black cube to see if Mr. Daniels really means that they can do anything in the notebooks.

The forest of alphabet blocks is easily read as an image of how Ally feels: lost in a dangerous forest that she can't understand. She seems to understand that drawing that might tip Mr. Daniels off to her anxiety about reading, making the black cube a safer choice for her.



The next day, Mr. Daniels approaches Ally with her drawing of the black cube and apologetically asks if she'd tell him what it means. Ally thinks she doesn't *really* want to get in trouble so with prompting, she says it's a drawing of a dark room where nobody can see her. She says that it'd be easier to be invisible but won't say why. Mr. Daniels nods slowly, thanks her for her honesty, and says he's glad she's not invisible. Ally is happy he said this, though she doesn't believe him. She realizes she's spent her life not looking at teachers' faces and decides that she has one new wish: to impress Mr. Daniels.

Even if Ally didn't want to let on about her reading issues, what she says about the cube tells Mr. Daniels even more about her self-esteem and her fragile emotional health. The fact that Mr. Daniels is able to make Ally want to impress him just by showing interest in her and telling her she's important suggests that it's not hard for a teacher to gain a student's trust, provided they show genuine interest and positive regard for the students.



CHAPTER 11: SCRAMBLED EGG

A few days later, Ally gets to school and discovers that Mr. Daniels has redone the seating chart. Ally is in the front row next to Keisha now. She thinks that Keisha can write and bake, while Ally can do neither. Ally worries all morning that Keisha doesn't like her and finally blurts that she doesn't mind being Keisha's friend. Annoyed, Keisha says that Ally doesn't need to do her any favors. Ally can't figure out what to say. The silence grows long and awkward, and Ally remembers how Grandpa always knew what to say.

Though Ally's narration and word choice suggests that she does struggle with some impulse control problems, especially when she's nervous, it's also important to recognize that Ally desperately wants to be liked and to have friends. Keisha is likely very attractive as a potential friend, given that she's smart, interesting, and will stand up to Shay.



Out of the blue, Ally asks Keisha if she likes eggs. Keisha seems incredulous, but Ally keeps going and talks about all the ways she likes to eat eggs. Keisha turns to search for something in her desk, which Ally knows is a polite way of ignoring her. She feels as though she's falling down the rabbit hole, just like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Ally's continual references to Alice in Wonderland suggest that she'd like to read and understands how to apply what she learns in books to her life; doing so is just impossible for her given that she can't read the books in the first place.



At lunch, Shay and Jessica invite Ally to sit with them. Ally doesn't want to, but she's tired of sitting alone and envious of the **friendship bracelets** the girls wear. Ally sees the bracelets as proof that someone cares, and she desperately wants to be a part of something, so she accepts. Ally checks her seat to make sure it's not booby trapped before sitting between Shay and Jessica. She notes their coy smiles.

Ally's acceptance of this invitation shows that her loneliness makes her vulnerable to Shay's bullying, as it doesn't seem like her invitation is innocent. Again, this reinforces how Ally's learning disability isolates her from her classmates.



Jessica points to Albert and everyone starts laughing. Ally doesn't understand why; Albert is dressed in his usual uniform of jeans and the Flint t-shirt. Shay finally points to Albert's sneakers, which Albert cut the backs out of. Shay and Jessica call Albert over and tease him about being poor and wearing slippers. Albert insists he'd just rather buy a chemistry set than shoes. Shay suggests they wear robes tomorrow, Jessica supports this, and Ally thinks that Shay is underhandedly teasing Jessica too and testing how far Jessica will follow her.

Ally's assessment that Shay is teasing Jessica makes it clear to the reader that despite Shay's friendship bracelets, she's actually a horrible friend. Teasing Albert about his shoes shows that Shay places a great deal of importance on a person's financial standing, which suggests that she's small-minded and has only one idea of what success is.



Turning to Ally, Shay asks if Ally will join them in wearing robes and what she thinks of Albert's shoes. Ally feels as though she's being interrogated. She considers sticking up for Albert but knows Shay won't like it. She says the shoes look dopey and feels immediately awful. Albert, however, seems unperturbed. He points out that all three girls are wearing red shirts and notes that any crewmember on *Star Trek* who wears a red shirt never appears again. This makes everyone laugh. Max says *Star Trek* isn't a good TV show, which stops Albert in his tracks.

Shay tells Albert that *he* doesn't have to care about his appearance, but everyone who has to look at him will suffer. Albert nonchalantly says that he doesn't care what Shay thinks and walks away. Ally wishes she were more like him and wants to be better. She reasons that at least she's not mean before realizing that she just was. Ally knows now that there are worse things than being lonely.

CHAPTER 12: WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM, ALBERT?

That night, Mom opens Ally's bedroom door to check on her. Ally explains how Jessica and Shay roped her into making fun of Albert and says she feels awful. Mom tells Ally that she can decide who she wants to be and says that mistakes happen. She encourages Ally to apologize to Albert.

The next morning, Ally is drawing a pigeon wedding in her notebook and wondering how to apologize to Albert when she notices Keisha behind her. Keisha compliments the drawing, which embarrasses Ally. Ally admires Keisha's thin braids, reaches out to touch them without thinking, and feels horrible again when Keisha is offended. She explains to the reader that sometimes her body does things she can't control.

Albert walks in, looking upset. Ally goes to him to apologize. He insists that the teasing didn't bother him and that he's actually upset about something else. Ally is amazed he's not upset about the bullying and thinks that whatever's bothering him must be really bad. She offers to help and, finally, Albert says that he can't figure out how fast an insect is going if it's flying forward or backwards inside a moving train car.

Ally sees a mind movie of a dragonfly inside an old-timey train car. She sees ladies in fancy dresses and a young girl with her mother. That girl wants to ride horses and do things, not just wear pretty clothes. When Ally comes back from her mind movie, she thinks about how that girl feels angry and held back from doing things she wants to do. Ally wishes she could help her.

When Ally chooses to go along with bullying Albert, it shows that there are dire consequences to being treated so poorly and to being alienated with her learning disability: she's more likely to be mean to others to compensate and try to earn favor from someone more popular.



This lesson that being mean doesn't pay shows Ally that even though Shay is popular, Shay is still not a good person to idolize or be truly jealous of. It's possible that Shay feels just as horrible as Ally does if she knows that bullying is wrong, which would make her existence very miserable.



Notice how Mom deals with this admission: she doesn't make Ally feel bad, she just redirects Ally's behavior. This offers a roadmap for how adults should deal with the places where students make mistakes.



Keisha's compliment suggests to Ally that she should take more pride in her artistic abilities than she currently does. Meanwhile, Ally's impulse control problems show the reader again how her dyslexia keeps her from appearing normal to her classmates.



Remember that for Ally, reading and writing are the only things up there with bullying that are awful. Albert's very different priorities remind Ally that her classmates are simply different—which isn't a bad thing but means that she'll need to be more empathetic if she wants to connect.



Ally's mind movie shows how she thinks of herself as being trapped by her learning disability. Thinking that she'd like to help this girl (a symbol for herself) shows that Ally is becoming ready to tackle her learning disability and start to think about it differently.



CHAPTER 13: TROUBLE WITH FLOWERS

Ally is very excited for the holiday concert. She got a new dress and her first pair of shoes with a heel. Ally thinks that she loves to sing but doesn't like the music teacher, Mrs. Muldoon, because she's prone to blowing up. Backstage, Shay makes fun of Albert's ill-fitting clothes. Keisha stands up for Albert, but Shay insists some people deserve to be pulled down. Albert helpfully notes that, logically, a person who is pulling another down is already below their victim. Keisha laughs and insults Shay, and then Mrs. Muldoon lines everyone up.

Last year, Ally got to stand in the front but now that she's grown, she gets to stand in the back next to Keisha. She admires how Keisha stood up for Albert and wishes she could be brave. Ally decides to focus on the happy fact that all the girls get to carry flowers and ignores that Jessica's father donated them.

Mrs. Muldoon hands out beautiful bouquets. Keisha smells hers and then brushes her fingers over the blooms, which accidentally breaks off a bud. Mrs. Muldoon rips the flowers away from Keisha, accuses her of being disrespectful, and says Keisha will be the only girl without flowers. Shay snidely says that people get what they deserve, and Ally hears Keisha sniff. She watches a mind movie of Mom's sad face if Ally were the only girl without flowers. Ally meets Mrs. Muldoon's eyes as she rips her bouquet in half and gives half to Keisha. Neither girl carries flowers that night, but they have the biggest smiles.

The shoes with heels indicates that Ally is growing up and beginning to mature, which quietly orients this book as a coming of age novel. This then foreshadows that Ally will learn how to think more positively about her reading problems and start to find her place in the world, possibly with the help of Keisha and Albert, given that they seem to be Shay's prime enemies.



Remember Mom's counsel that Ally can choose the kind of person she wants to be. By admitting she admires Keisha, it shows that Ally is reorienting the type of person she'd like to be to someone braver and kinder, like Keisha.



With the bouquet taken away, Ally doesn't even have to try to ignore that the flowers came from Jessica's dad—in other words, this event allows Ally to move even further away from the bullies and towards Keisha and genuine caring and friendship. Notice too that Ally seems unconcerned about getting in trouble here. This suggests that there are times when "misbehaving" is worth it to make a point.



CHAPTER 14: BOXED IN AND BOXED OUT

On Friday afternoon, Mr. Daniels announces a challenge. The class will split into three groups and each will receive a shoebox filled with a mystery object, and they must guess what the object is without opening the box. Everyone looks excited. Ally is put in a group with Jessica, Max, Oliver, and Suki. Ally considers asking to go to the nurse when she sees all of Jessica's **friendship bracelets**. Oliver grabs their box and shakes it. Max tries to take the box, and Suki surprisingly says that with the time limits they have, they each get two minutes with the box.

Max shakes the box and says the object is heavy. Oliver shouts that it might be a kangaroo and Jessica gives him a disgusted look that makes him shrink. When Ally gets the box, she discovers that the object rolls. She suggests a baseball and surprisingly, Jessica agrees. However, Ally then discovers that the ball bounces. She asks Max if a baseball would bounce, and they amend their answer.

Wanting to go to the nurse after being reminded that she's alone shows just how damaging Ally's loneliness is. It makes her want to isolate herself even further, even despite the fact that the other kids in Ally's group are known to be kind. Suki's decision to speak shows that Mr. Daniels is giving her the confidence to use her voice and is helping her believe in herself.



When Jessica sides with Ally but still gives Oliver the nasty look, it suggests that the social structure may be changing some—not necessarily for the better yet, since Jessica is still bullying Oliver. This shows that change is indeed possible, and it can be positive with more work.



The second box contains an item that slides, not rolls. Ally feels as though she can almost see it and is surprised when Oliver tells her she's good at this. She even forgets to be nervous, since she's performing just as well as her classmates. The third box seems like an oversized marker, and Mr. Daniels stays to observe Ally's group with the fourth box. Jessica compliments Max as he turns the box around, and Oliver guesses the box contains a quarter as though he wants nothing more than to be right. Jessica looks incensed as Oliver hands the box to Ally, saying that she's the best.

Mr. Daniels tries to get Ally's wandering attention and she explains that she sometimes forgets to talk. She rolls the box around and finally says that whatever's in the box only hits two sides. Ally shakes it some more and then asks if the object is taped or tied in the box. Mr. Daniels laughs and then says that no one has ever figured this box out. He opens it to reveal two glue sticks tied together, with the strings taped to two sides of the box. He gives Ally her first high-five from a teacher.

CHAPTER 15: UNGREASED GEARS

A few nights later, Ally sits at the kitchen table, trying to complete her homework: a paper describing her feelings on a short story Mr. Daniels read. Ally knows it shouldn't be hard, but she thinks it'll take her forever to write and be unintelligible anyway. Travis walks in the door happily but refuses to help Ally with her paper. He says he can fix her car, but says he'd rather eat a bag of hair than write. Travis insists he's no better at writing than Ally is.

Ally can't decide whether or not to turn in her paper at all. In truth it took her all night and gave her a horrible headache, but she's afraid that Mr. Daniels will think she did it in only a few minutes. He's in the hallway with another student, but Keisha snags Ally at the door and gives her a cupcake. She snaps at Max when he seems jealous, and Oliver flails and says, "Me want cupcake!" Shay calls Oliver a freak and says that Cookie Monster talks like that, but Oliver gets a serious look on his face and insists that *he's* talking like that. Shay and Jessica stalk off and Oliver remembers that he hid a cookie in his desk after the Halloween party. He goes to search for it.

Keisha remarks that the class loses control over food and then gives Ally the cupcake. She says it's to thank Ally for what she did with the flowers. Inside, the cupcake says "wow." Mr. Daniels calls the class to attention and then Keisha quietly tells Ally that she has guts. She invites Ally to sit with her at lunch, and Ally watches a mind movie of them eating happily together. Ally accepts the invitation.

Discovering that she's good at this allows Ally to experience what it feels like to be "normal," as this exercise is one that plays to her proclivity towards thinking in pictures. In this way, she is actually better at the exercise than some of her classmates because she thinks visually all the time, while for others, this exercise is likely very hard if they think only in words.



By praising Ally and showing her that she is capable of doing something right at school, Mr. Daniels begins to lay the groundwork for helping Ally feel successful. By doing this, he can help her learn to trust him as well as herself, as these exercises will give Ally valuable evidence that there are places where she can succeed.



It's telling that Ally is trying to honestly attempt this assignment at all; this speaks to the degree to which she already idolizes Mr. Daniels and wants to do well for him. Travis's excuses, on the other hand, again suggest that he's also dealing with dyslexia, given that his excuses seem like they could've feasibly come from Ally.



The fact that Oliver feels comfortable standing up to Shay offers hope that Mr. Daniels is creating positive and permanent change in his class's social hierarchy. By refusing to be hurt by Shay's words, Oliver denies her of her power. Similarly, Keisha's cupcake for Ally is another way that students can celebrate the changing social structure and the fact that Shay is gradually becoming less powerful, as well as mark their new friendship.



The invitation to sit with Keisha shows the true power of changing the social hierarchy: former outcasts like Ally can now feel safer trying to make friends, as the consequences of trying and possibly failing aren't as steep as they once were.



Ally has the best lunch and recess she's had in a long time. Mr. Daniels calls Ally to his desk afterwards, her notebook and homework in his hands and a smile trying to hide a serious look on his face. He praises her for turning in her paper but asks how long it took her to do it. Ally considers telling him she rushed it but admits that it took her a long time and she tried to do her best. Mr. Daniels praises her again for trying.

By choosing to tell the truth, Ally shows that she trusts Mr. Daniels to not make fun of her or punish her for the poor writing or how long it took her. His praise allows him to tell Ally that he values trying and failing over perfection, which will help Ally become more comfortable with failure.



CHAPTER 16: WHAT I'VE GOT

A few days later, Ally shows up to school with her writing arm in a sling. Mr. Daniels is going to ask them to write stories and with a sling, she can't write. She tells a suspicious Mr. Daniels that she tripped over her cat on the stairs and the cat's name is Pork Chop. As awkward as the conversation is, Ally does get out of writing—but Mr. Daniels asks her to read a book instead. Ally's eyes hurt immediately. She turns the page every now and then and watches mind movies of flying. She watches others write and wonders why Mr. Daniels keeps looking at her.

Remember that Ally already shared with her class that her family has no pets because Mom is allergic, which suggests that Mr. Daniels allows this to go on because he sees it for what it is: a desperate attempt to get out of something that seems impossible and causes Ally a great deal of pain.



CHAPTER 17: MISFIT LUNCH

Ally watches Albert pretend to read and notices a new bruise on his jaw. She approaches him and surprises herself by inviting him to eat lunch with her and Keisha, so they can "all sit alone together." Albert picks at the logic of Ally's phrasing but accepts her invitation.

Though it takes Ally a long time to get there, Albert's interest in logic isn't just an interest: like Ally's sling, it's a way for him to escape from things that make him sad and anxious, which shows that he's just as lonely as Ally is.



At lunch, Albert asks who decided that a half-pint of milk is enough. Ally suggests he buys two or ask his mom for more money, but Albert says that his lunch is prepaid. Ally feels stupid as she realizes that Albert gets free lunch and apologizes. Albert is unperturbed. He says his mom (Audrey) isn't pleased about the free lunch, but Albert's dad is an inventor and won't get a real job. Ally vows to herself to keep this secret.

The choice to keep what she learns secret shows that Ally is well aware that Albert's financial struggles are possibly something that's embarrassing or difficult for him. This shows that when given the opportunity, Ally is thoughtful and sympathetic.



Keisha sits down and immediately says that she watched *Star Trek* and the special effects are pathetic. Albert looks horrified, but they're interrupted as Shay and Jessica walk by and make a joke about the Island of Misfit Toys. Keisha ignores them, and Albert says the girls don't bother him at all. Ally wishes she could not care too. Albert says that the whole idea of misfit toys seems weird—there's nothing actually wrong with any of the toys on the island; some of them just have different names than usual. Ally argues that things can be misfits just because they're called something different, thinking of the words "dumb" and "baby."

Star Trek first appeared on TV in the 1960s and was then taken up again in 1987, meaning that to a modern viewer, the visual effects aren't that convincing. Ally's insistence that having a strange name can make someone a misfit suggests that she leans heavily on the fact that others call her dumb. While she's starting to suspect that she isn't, those words have power when she hears them all the time.



Albert and Keisha discuss the merits of the cowboy who rides an ostrich. Albert insists that an ostrich is a perfect choice given that ostriches are hardier animals than horses. Lost in thought, Ally thinks that people have been calling her "slow" to her face for forever, as though she's too dumb to know what they're saying. She thinks that people think that knowing Ally is a slow reader tells them everything about her, when there has to be more to her.

Ally's questions here show that Mr. Daniels is starting to have an effect on Ally: now that she's had several instances during class where she's been successful, she's starting to believe that that could happen more often, and that she might not be dumb.



CHAPTER 18: TRUTHS AND UNTRUTHS

Keisha flounces to her seat, annoyed because Mr. Daniels asked her to do a paper again since she can do better. Ally realizes she's never heard this from Mr. Daniels and it suddenly bugs her. She wants to fit in and be told that what she's submitting isn't good enough, since she knows it isn't good. Mr. Daniels hasn't asked Ally to write in several days, even though she's not wearing the fake sling anymore. She doesn't know if she's ready to admit she can't write or if she wants to keep pretending. Ally writes something without even trying to get it right and then gives it to Mr. Daniels directly. He looks at it briefly and then tells her to put it in the assignment cubby. Ally walks away without taking it.

Ally's discomfort when she realizes that Mr. Daniels isn't picking at her indicates that shifting her thinking to truly trust Mr. Daniels will be a difficult process, as she's not quite sure at this point where this is all going. However, writing without trying to make it right is likely a valuable evaluation tool for Mr. Daniels, as he'll be able to see how Ally's mind wants to write when she's not trying to fix it. In other words, this will likely go on to help Ally.



In the cafeteria, Keisha addresses Albert and says she wants to talk about his Flint shirt. He corrects her that he has five of the same shirt. Keisha goes on to say that she searched for Flint and discovered that it's a place in Michigan, a rock, and a kind of sneaker. Albert looks uncomfortable. Finally, with gentle prodding from Ally, Albert says that Flint is a *Star Trek* character who goes to his own planet, makes robots to protect him, and left Earth so he'd be free from unkind people. Albert says that a lot of people aren't nice to him, and he understands the appeal.

This explanation shows that Albert is actually bothered by bullies; he just doesn't show it. His shirt likely acts as a reminder that someday, Albert will be able to remove himself from these situations where he's a target for bullies. Keisha's decision to look up flint, on the other hand, shows that she's genuinely interested in Albert and wants to get to know him, which will help the two become better friends.



CHAPTER 19: NOT-SO-SWEET SECRET

Mom smiles when Ally, Albert, and Keisha walk into Petersen's. She seats them in a booth and takes their ice cream order. Albert wants to know if it's free and then suggests that Mr. Daniels isn't a trusting person. He says that Mr. Daniels wanted to know about his bruises and seemed to think they came from Albert's parents, which isn't true. Keisha says that she's also curious where the bruises come from. Quietly, Albert says that a group of bullies beats him up most days after school. When Keisha asks why Albert doesn't hit the bullies back, Albert says he doesn't believe in violence and is afraid he'll be blamed for hitting first.

It's worth noting that as a teacher, Mr. Daniels would be legally obligated to investigate Albert's bruises if he suspected that Albert was a victim of abuse. This investigation then shows that Mr. Daniels is a caring teacher who takes his job and his responsibilities seriously, even if Albert might not see it that way. The disconnect in how they think about this shows that though Mr. Daniels may be doing the right thing, that can still be embarrassing for his students.



Albert stares at his ice cream and then says it reminds him of Ellis Island. At Keisha's prodding, he says that immigrants on Ellis Island sometimes got ice cream. They didn't know what it was, so they spread it on toast like butter. Albert says he feels as though the same thing is happening to him: the bullies think he's a fighter, so they fight him. Exasperatedly, Keisha says that the bullies fight Albert because he won't fight back. Ally suggests that Albert ask for help from his parents, but Albert says he wants to solve this himself. Keisha points out angrily that he can solve this by fighting back, since he's bigger. Albert says the bullies are like fire ants in that they're small and overwhelming. Ally laughs, though she feels sad.

Keisha continues to angrily try to convince Albert to fight back, while he continues to cite his pacifist beliefs and looks progressively more upset. When Keisha asks Albert what it would take to get him to fight back, Ally tries to engage Albert in a conversation about why he likes science. Albert asks Ally why Shay is so mean to her in particular. Keisha also wants to know.

Hesitantly, Ally says that she won the art award last year, which made Shay angry. And on Ally's second day at school, Ally had to sit next to Shay at lunch. She'd brought a bag of cheese crackers with her and midway through lunch, Shay grabbed the bag and ate the crackers. Ally says she used to have more problems with impulse control, which is why, when Shay pulled a piece of cake out of her lunchbox, Ally reached over and grabbed a hunk of cake in retaliation. Keisha laughs while Albert looks wide-eyed. Ally thinks she hates this story—she knew immediately she'd pay for her behavior. She tells the final part: after lunch, she found her own crackers in her pocket, and realized that Shay thought Ally had grabbed her cake for no reason. Keisha keeps laughing and says it's the best story she's ever heard.

CHAPTER 20: IS THIS A GOOD THING?

After school, Ally is in her room when she hears Travis come in the door and call for her. He appears in her room with a big grin on his face. Ally notices that he has keys in his hand, and he says he got "it." They run outside, and Ally sees an old car that looks more like a pickle on wheels than a car. She asks a few questions about it and Travis promises to take her places after he fixes it up, as well as for a ride now. She teasingly asks if she has to push or pull.

Again, Albert's assessment of himself in terms of being like the ice cream shows that other people's perceptions have a great deal of power to influence how a person is seen in the world. Though Keisha is likely correct in that the bullies continue to torment Albert because he never makes them stop, it's also likely that he's a target mostly because he looks like a fighter but actually isn't one at all. This suggests that these disconnects in identity can make life even more difficult.



Though Keisha is held up as a good, strong, no-nonsense character, it's also true that she has a long way to go in terms of learning to empathize with her friends and truly listen to what they're saying. Though the reader is meant to agree with Keisha, she'll need to change her methods if she wants to convince Albert too.



This instance mirrors what happened with the card at the baby shower: because of Ally's dyslexia and the accompanying other symptoms, Ally appears totally out of touch with social norms, which in turn gives Shay ammunition to label Ally a weird kid. However, it's also important to recognize that when Ally stood up for herself in this story, she didn't seem as scared of Shay as she does now. This suggests that things have gotten worse for Ally in the last six months or so since this happened.



The fact that Travis can hold down a job and save the money required to buy a car in the first place offers an example of the ways in which people with dyslexia can still function in the world, even without the reading skills. This shows that there's more than one way to be successful.



The Walking Liberty **half-dollar** hangs from the rearview, and Ally feels as though Dad and Grandpa are there too. It starts to rain, so Travis pulls over and jumps out. He connects some springs and a rope to the windshield wipers and then jumps back in, explaining that the wiper motor went out hours earlier. He shows Ally his system for manually moving the wipers. She teases him for it, but gladly climbs into the backseat behind him to run the wipers. They happily pull up to a red light. Travis tells Ally to look at the lady next to them. The lady is shocked and her face is funny—until Ally realizes that Shay is also in the car.

The next day at school, Shay waits until Mr. Daniels walks into the hallway before whispering loudly to Jessica that yesterday, she saw Ally and Travis in a disgusting and run-down car. Ally tries to ignore the, but can't when they say that it's probably all Mom could afford. Ally whirls on them and says it's Travis's car and it's not a loser car. Shay says that Travis must be a bigger loser than Ally. Ally tells Shay to shut up and says that Shay is a loser just as Mr. Daniels walks back in. Ally tries to defend herself. Though he doesn't punish her, he tells her to walk away next time. Ally is tired of walking away.

CHAPTER 21: BUTTERFLY WISHES

In the middle of a brainstorming session for a community service project, Shay raises her hand and announces that she's inviting everyone to her birthday party so no one is left out. Keisha asks how this connects to the community service project, and Mr. Daniels compliments Shay and then quickly moves on. Later, Shay loudly whispers to Jessica that she's mad that Shay's mom is making her invite everyone, and she hopes some people don't show up.

Mom makes Ally agree to go to Shay's party, even though Shay is mean and neither Albert nor Keisha are going. At lunch the next day, Ally asks Albert and Keisha for a disease to use as an excuse to not go. Albert suggests the black plague and lists the symptoms. Keisha points out that Ally could just have a cold like a normal person.

Ally arrives at the Butterfly Gardens for Shay's party. She notices girls from other classrooms as well as Jessica, all of whom are wearing **friendship bracelets**. Ally wonders if Keisha would like one. An employee lines up the kids and talks about the butterflies, making it clear that they're not to grab them. The butterflies flock to Ally's orange shirt, and she wonders if she's part butterfly.

The half-dollar here acts as a symbol for the ways in which Travis has been successful, despite his unique challenges and differences. Like the coin, he's still valuable and can make a difference in the world through his work on cars and old machines. Seeing Shay and her mom in the car next to them suggests that Shay will bully Ally for this car, as the car could be seen as a marker of poverty.



By waiting until Mr. Daniels leaves the room, Shay demonstrates just how important it is to her to pull others down, as she clearly puts a great deal of thought and planning into how she does it. This again indicates that her popularity and social standing depends on bullying others to make herself look powerful, as if her popularity were predicated on kindness, she wouldn't have to be secretive about it.



Here, inviting everyone but making it clear that Shay doesn't want to do so is a way for Shay to basically have her cake and eat it too: she gets the praise from Mr. Daniels for being inclusive, while also effectively disinviting everyone she didn't want to invite in the first place.



By forcing Ally to go to the party, Mom does ruin Shay's plan and forces Shay to see that she can't have everything she wants, though it does put Ally at risk of bullying—especially since Ally's friends won't be there to protect her.



Ally sees the butterflies as symbols of what she could possibly be if she weren't held back by her dyslexia. When Ally wonders if Keisha would like a bracelet, it shows that Ally is beginning to think critically about things and realize that she can make things fit her own needs.



Ally remembers Albert saying once that Native Americans believe that if a person caught a butterfly and whispered their deepest wish to it, the butterfly would carry the wish to the spirits. Ally remembers the employee saying to not grab the butterflies, but her hand acts of its own accord and closes loosely around a black and orange one. She opens her hand and the butterfly flies to the ground. The employee is upset, and Shay says that Ally likely killed it by touching its wings. Ally tries to explain about the wish givers, but Shay calls Ally a freak show. Shay's mom explains that Ally is part of the party, but not her daughter, and Ally wishes Mom were here.

The employee carefully picks up the hurt butterfly as Ally watches a mind movie of butterflies falling like rain. Suki comforts Ally by saying she knows Ally didn't hurt the butterfly on purpose, but Ally thinks that she'd do almost anything for her wish to come true.

Everything that happens here offers more evidence for how bullying like Shay carries out is allowed to happen: Shay's mom effectively flouts responsibility for Ally while also not reprimanding Shay, while the employees fail to consider that Ally may have impulse control problems and instead, believe that she's just being a troublemaker. However, remembering Albert's story shows again how Ally could be a great reader if she could learn to read, as she connects the stories to her life.



Suki's kind words begin to show Ally that she has more friends than she might think, which indicates that the social hierarchy is continuing to change—and that the students are becoming more empowered to stand up to Shay.



CHAPTER 22: NO WAY TO TREAT A QUEEN

Ally tries to call Albert later, but she gets a message that his number isn't in service. She hopes he hasn't moved. She's relieved to see him on Monday and asks him if it's true that touching a butterfly's wings kills it. Albert says it isn't true and Ally is so relieved, she hugs him. She thinks his surprised expression is hilarious.

Later at lunch, Shay compliments Albert's Flint shirt and explains that she got a new sweater that's purple, the color of royalty. Ally doesn't know what to say, but Albert confirms that purple is a royal color. Shay says that Albert and Ally are uncouth and asks if Ally even knows what "uncouth" means. Albert says that only an uncouth person would wear snail snot and goes onto explain that the color purple used to come from snail slime. In medieval times, it took three thousand snails to make one purple cloak. Albert and Ally agree that they'd rather wear beige, and Ally smiles at the disgusted look on Shay's face.

Albert's number being out of service is likely another indicator of his family's poverty, while Ally's thought that he may have moved shows that she's still naïve when it comes to what living in poverty actually means and entails.



Even though Ally and Albert use this fact about snail slime to pester Shay, the fact also makes a good point: that something can be small and be considered gross, but still be extremely important, valuable, and a marker of royalty and class. By asking Ally to participate in talking about the merits of snail slime, Albert also gives Ally a safer place to practice standing up to Shay, which in turn can help Ally become more confident.



CHAPTER 23: WORDS THAT BREATHE

Monday is the day that Mr. Daniels goes over new vocabulary words. It's not a bad lesson for Ally, since she can usually remember the words by making up mind movies. She explains to the reader that her one rule in school is to say she doesn't know if she's asked a question, as this eventually makes teachers stop asking. Today, however, Ally's hand shoots into the air when Mr. Daniels asks for a volunteer to explain the difference between "alone" and "lonely."

While Ally doesn't offer any judgment calls on her mind movies, it's important to point out that using mind movies to remember words like this is a skill that often has to be taught to people who don't think visually, like Ally does. This gives another example of a way in which Ally actually struggles less than her peers, but just doesn't know it.



Ally's not sure she actually wants to answer, but she feels like an expert on those words. She feels as though Mr. Daniels can see right into her lonely heart and says that being alone can be a choice and isn't always bad but being lonely isn't a choice. She says the worst is feeling lonely in a room full of people.

Mr. Daniels looks sad and Ally can barely remember what she even said. She hears Mr. Daniels saying her name, which calls her back to the present, and he says that Ally deserves a trophy for the best answer of the year. Ally can't understand why he'd say that and feels like she has to leave, so she asks to go to the bathroom. Shay shakes her head and though she says nothing, Ally knows what she would say. Ally feels as though she did something wrong, even though she answered right, and thinks she'd be a wooden nickel if she were a **coin**.

CHAPTER 24: IMAGINARY HERO

Mr. Daniels assigns a writing exercise where students must write about a fictional character they consider a hero. Albert finds the premise illogical, while Oliver spouts off the names of every superhero. He even asks Suki for her opinion, but keeps talking and never lets her answer. Shay whispers meanly that they don't need to listen to Oliver's thoughts, but Oliver gravely says that if he were Aquaman, he'd summon piranhas to take Shay away. Eventually, everyone gets to work. Ally loves that Albert can't choose a character, while Oliver wants to write about every superhero.

The next day, Mr. Daniels calls Ally up to his desk. He's holding her paper and asks Ally to read it out loud for him, as he had a hard time with her handwriting. Ally squints at her paper, but Mr. Daniels takes it and asks Ally to just talk about her hero. Her hero is Roy G. Biv—the colors of the color spectrum. She made him up and he means a lot to her because she uses the colors in her art. Ally stops short of saying that art is the only place she doesn't feel like a failure. Mr. Daniels calls Ally clever and an out-of-the-box thinker. He explains that this is a good thing, which confuses Ally.

The next day, Ally is actually excited to present Roy G. Biv to the class. She takes out a color wheel that she made and asks what color is made by mixing all the colors together. Most kids guess dark colors, but Ally says the answer is white. She spins the wheel and as the colors blur, they turn white. Everyone, even Jessica and Shay, say it's cool. Oliver asks if Ally is going to give the color wheel away and says he'd give it to his bus driver.

The answer that Ally gives reminds the reader of just how lonely Ally is in her life, where she's shut off from having friends and participating in normal activities because she can't read.



This feeling of failure, even though Ally gave a perfect answer, speaks to the power of the narratives that Ally has spent her life hearing about herself. In other words, Ally has heard that she's dumb so many times, she now struggles to believe that she's actually done something well. This illustrates the consequences of unidentified dyslexia to a person's self-esteem.



As Ally continues to have experiences where she's able to relax and be more successful, she becomes able to look at her classmates as people, not as enemies. Now that the social situation isn't so fraught, Ally has the bandwidth to appreciate the differences between her classmates and understand that those differences are what make them special.



Because Ally has spent her entire school career being teased for being different, it's earth shattering for her to hear that thinking differently is actually a good thing. This again speaks to the failures of Ally's other teachers to make Ally feel successful or identify her dyslexia sooner, while also showing that Mr. Daniels is a far superior educator. His choice to ask Ally to just talk shows that he understands she has trouble reading.



Though Ally's classmates are correct if one is talking about paint, Ally is correct that all colors make white from a scientific perspective. The fact that there are two correct answers shows again that difference is good, important, and that anything can be correct as long as one is answering the right question.



As Ally sits down, she hears Jessica ask Shay for another **friendship bracelet**. Ally pretends not to listen as Shay says that she has lots of orders to fill and Jessica still owes her \$3 for the last one. Ally turns around and asks incredulously if Shay actually charges for the bracelets. Shay meanly says she'd never sell Ally one but might for \$10. Ally can't believe that anyone bought the bracelets or that Shay charges at all and turns down the offer. Shay calls Ally a dope and Ally thinks she's right—Albert and Keisha are true friends and she only just realized that.

Discovering that Shay has been selling the bracelets means that Ally now has proof that Shay's power at school didn't come from actual popularity; it came from her ability to scare people into following her and making her even wealthier. This shows Ally too that friendship bracelets are an incomplete marker of friendship, as evidenced by her realization that she does have friends.



CHAPTER 25: CELEBRATION OR DEVASTATION?

Mr. Daniels looks surprisingly happy one morning. He announces that after they wrote nature poems last week, he entered all of them in the first ever Fantastico Poetry Award. Ally hopes that Albert will win and watches Shay. As Mr. Daniels begins to announce the award, Ally sees Shay look surprised and then disgusted. Mr. Daniels puts his hand on Ally's shoulder and congratulates her. Ally can't figure out how this happened as Mr. Daniels invites her up to collect her prize.

From what the reader knows of Mr. Daniels, it's likely that he chose to bring up the poetry award in this way so that Shay wouldn't have a chance to bully others into writing bad poems on purpose. He may also have come up with the award to give Ally a way to feel successful, since Ally goes on to mention that she never wins things like this.



Ally feels like the floor will swallow her and sees that the poem in his hand is indeed hers. She begins to feel happy she won an award and thinks that this used to be something that would only appear in the **Sketchbook of Impossible Things**. She's happy she has her poem memorized when Mr. Daniels invites her to read it. He motions for everyone to applaud and as Ally watches her classmates, she thinks of all the good poems they wrote. As Mr. Daniels extends a certificate and a coupon for ice cream, Ally finds she can't take them. She knows this is a pity award and thinks this is the worst she's ever felt. Ally runs out of the room.

Though the reader has mostly only seen actual fantastical things in the Sketchbook, Ally's assessment that winning an award was formerly unthinkable shows just how unsuccessful Ally feels when it comes to just getting through the day. Her assessment of this award being a pity award is likely wrong, and the fact that she won tells the reader that things are beginning to turn around for her.



CHAPTER 26: STALLING

Ally runs into a bathroom stall to hide. Keisha comes into the bathroom and asks why Ally ran from an award. She's puzzled when Ally insists that Mr. Daniels was just trying to be nice. Ally asks Keisha if she expects her bike to fall apart when she gets on it. She asks Keisha to imagine if, every time she got on her bike, the wheels came off while everyone watched, and everyone thought it was her fault that she was bad at riding a bike. Keisha doesn't quite follow, but Ally says her brain just won't do what she wants it to. She also says that Keisha doesn't understand what it's like to be different and that Keisha being black isn't the same kind of different.

Ally's ability to articulate to Keisha how she feels about school through the bike analogy represents a major turning point in Ally's development. It shows that she's now willing to trust Keisha with this admission, as well as admit just how anxiety inducing school is for her because she can't trust that things will go well. Though Ally's comment about the hierarchy of difference is insensitive, it does speak to how big of a deal Ally's disability is in her own mind.



Keisha says that she and Ally are friends, but this is nonsense and Ally is being foolish for saying these things. Keisha insists that she's only different when people look at her wrong, and she doesn't care what those people think anyway. Ally admits that she just wants to fit in. Keisha is quiet for a minute and then says that she, Ally, and Albert don't fit in, but it's silly to want to be like Shay and fit in with her group. Ally finally comes out of the stall and thanks Keisha for being her friend. Keisha says to thank her for telling Shay that there's a spot on the back of her fancy riding jacket, as it'll be fun to watch her look for it.

By insisting that seeing an issue with difference is other people's problem, not hers, Keisha is able to find peace with the space she inhabits and recognize that she can't make everyone happy. Ally, on the other hand, still wants to make everyone happy, since she can seldom make anyone happy. Keisha's pep talk will hopefully help Ally find a happy medium, as Keisha's right that Ally will never impress Shay.



CHAPTER 27: HALF-BAKED AFTERNOON

Keisha invites Albert and Ally to her house to help her test if cookie dough letters will work in her cupcakes. She tells Albert to think of it as a science experiment and slides the cookbook towards Ally. Ally panics and spins off into a mind movie, but Albert offers to trade jobs. Ally rolls out dough and cuts the word "cow" out as Albert reads. They arrange the letters in the cupcake tins, cover them with batter, and put them in the oven.

The fact that even just baking with Keisha is such a difficult experience for Ally speaks to the amount of anxiety she has about reading: it's even stressful when it's among friends whom Ally trusts not to tease her. Albert's offer to take the cookbook can be read as a way for him to quietly take care of his friend.



Albert asks for milk, explaining that they've switched to water at his house. He then asks if a vegetarian can eat a cupcake with "cow" inside. Ally notices that the oven is smoking. Keisha opens the oven and smoke billows out; the cupcakes overflowed and made a mess. Keisha is just disappointed, but Ally thinks that whenever she writes, it turns into a mess.

Again, Albert's comment about "switching to water" illustrates how poor his family is. When Ally blames herself for the mess, it continues to show the consequences of never being able to be successful at reading: Ally feels like she can't do anything right.



CHAPTER 28: DEAL OF A LIFETIME

As kids leave for lunch, Mr. Daniels calls Ally to his desk. He compliments her on her opinions and answers and says she has wonderful gifts. Ally doesn't understand how he can possibly think this. Then, he asks a series of questions: if reading gives Ally headaches, and if she thinks one word and says another. Ally nervously answers yes to both. When he asks her if letters move, she says that of course they do. This makes Mr. Daniels's eyes widen.

All the questions that Mr. Daniels asks are screening questions for dyslexia, which indicates that Mr. Daniels is narrowing down the possibilities of what Ally might be struggling with. This continues to illustrate what a caring and insightful teacher he is.



His final question is if Ally knows what chess is and if she knows how to play. Ally knows what it is but doesn't know how to play. Mr. Daniels says that Ally would like it and offers to teach her after school. Ally knows this is a trap of some sort, so she says no, even though she wants to learn. She turns around when Mr. Daniels says he'd excuse her from homework for learning to play and says there's no catch. Ally agrees and shakes Mr. Daniels's hand, happy that she's getting out of homework and that he clearly thought about Ally outside of school, when he didn't have to.

Ally's happiness that Mr. Daniels thought of her outside of normal school hours is another indicator that Ally desperately wants to be seen and heard by the adults around her, not to be a bother. Though Mr. Daniels doesn't outright explain his reasoning for teaching Ally chess, it's likely something that he knows she'll be good at and knows that it'll therefore help boost her confidence.



CHAPTER 29: FISH IN A TREE

Ally's class gets off the bus to visit the Noah Webster House. Ally thinks it'll be a **silver dollar** day as Albert starts filling his pockets with acorns. Oliver and Max throw acorns at a tree, Ally picks one up too, and Shay laughs at Albert when Mr. Daniels isn't looking. Ally tells her not to, so Shay says she'll laugh at Ally instead. Ally and Keisha encourage Albert to stand up for himself, but he says that doing so will only let Shay know it bothers him. He says that he's more worried about the acorns right now, as he believes the trees might be in danger of fungus.

Ally ends up in a group with Albert and Shay and the guide takes them through the house. They see a bedroom and Albert can recite where the origins of the phrase "sleep tight" comes from, though Shay makes fun of him for it. Then, they tour the kitchen. Ally latches on when the guide says that girls didn't go to school as much as boys did, and she asks Albert if time travel is possible and how she'd look in a bonnet. Albert is just puzzled.

Then, they go to a colonial schoolroom with the rest of the class. A lady talks about how Noah Webster developed the first American dictionaries and helped to standardize English. Ally thinks Webster was a jerk for doing so. The lady passes out slates and Ally draws a picture of her acorn. Then, the lady pulls out a dunce cap and explains that bad students used to wear them and stand in corners. As Shay giggles and shows her friends her slate, Ally catches sight of it—she drew a head in a dunce cap and labeled it "Ally." The lady sees and tells Shay to erase it, but Ally runs out of the room in tears.

Ally runs until she finds a swing set that reminds her of Grandpa. Before too long, she notices Mr. Daniels's feet in front of her. He asks if she'll tell him what happened, but Ally just wants to be left alone. Mr. Daniels is quiet for a moment and then picks up a stick and writes in the dirt, saying that he and his brother used to write on the beach. He invites Ally to write something, but she wants to get away from words. Mr. Daniels asks Ally to let him help her.

Finally, Ally says that nobody's going to be able to help her because she's dumb. Mr. Daniels seems shocked to hear that she believes this, and says Ally isn't dumb. When Ally asks why she can't read, Mr. Daniels says she might have dyslexia, which just means that her brain figures things out differently. He tells her she's brave for continuing to come back to school, despite the bullying and difficulties. And, he says, she can do amazing things like draw, do math, and come up with good one-liners.

By changing the subject to talk about the potentially sick trees, Albert shows that he does much the same thing that Ally does when faced with uncomfortable situations. While she escapes into mind movies, Albert escapes into science. Both methods allow them to ignore or rationalize what's happening to them, though these methods do isolate them from even kind people.



For Ally, learning that there was a time when dyslexia wasn't something that would've held her back as much only increases her sense that she's abnormal and weird. It makes her feel like her real crime was being born in the wrong time, not that she's a victim of a school system that can't properly serve her.



Shay's willingness to draw this horrible drawing suggests that she understands that because the class is in a new place and Mr. Daniels is nowhere to be seen, this is a prime opportunity to get away with this kind of behavior. This reminds the reader just how dependent Ally's comfort is on whether or not the adults in charge are willing and able to take control of Shay.



By bringing Mr. Daniels and Grandpa together through the swing set, the novel sets up Mr. Daniels to more formally take Ally's place as her mentor and cheerleader. In this way, Ally can start to move on more from Grandpa's death, as well as move forward with learning to read.



It's important to recognize that by framing Ally's inability to read as a learning disability and a difference in Ally's brain, Mr. Daniels is able to help Ally think more positively about it. This shows again the power that words have to shape perception: Ally's not dumb, she's just different, and thinking about her reading difficulties in that way can help her become more confident.



Finally, Mr. Daniels says that he's spoken to Mrs. Silver and Miss Kessler, and they'd like to give Ally some tests. The results will help them help her. Ally looks Mr. Daniels in the eye as he says that she is smart, and she will learn to read. Ally feels she has no choice to believe him; she's tired of feeling miserable. As they head back to the museum, Mr. Daniels says that once, someone said that if a person judges a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it'll believe it's stupid. Ally sees mind movies of animals doing absurd things and wonders if it's really that simple.

Mr. Daniels's saying introduces the idea that a person must be celebrated for the things that they do well, or all they'll focus on is the things they do poorly. In Ally's case, this means that her drawing and her abilities at math haven't been celebrated enough, while all the focus has been on her failure to grasp written language—which, taken together, makes her feel dumb.



CHAPTER 30: MISERABLE KING

Two days later, Miss Kessler pulls Ally out of class and they go through some puzzles and games. After school, Ally has her first chess lesson. Mr. Daniels goes through the pieces and the goal of the game. Surprisingly for Ally, she's relaxed. They begin to play and during their second game, Ally captures Mr. Daniels's queen. She wants to ask if he let her win, but she doesn't. She marvels that this game isn't hard and it's actually fun. Ally can see the moves in her head and watches a mind movie of living chess pieces.

Because chess is a very visual game that also can utilize math, it's the perfect game for Ally. It gives her a place where she can be successful and where Mr. Daniels can praise her for doing so well, which in turn will help their relationship. This will then help Mr. Daniels earn Ally's trust as he teaches her to read.



CHAPTER 31: LOTS OF WAYS HOME

A week later when Ally stays after school, Mr. Daniels says he has news: Ally does have dyslexia, she's very bright, and he needs her help. He says that it'll take time to arrange formal accommodations, and he's currently going to school to get a degree in special education, which would help him help kids like Ally. Mr. Daniels asks if Ally would stay after school and let him help her a few times per week. It'll help him with degree, and Ally can learn to read.

Public schools are legally required to provide accommodations for students like Ally but coming up with those can take time—time that Ally, given her low self-esteem, doesn't have to waste. By offering to help her now, Mr. Daniels shows that he cares about her and wants to make her understand that she's worthy of attention.



Ally thinks that she'd sleep at school if it'd help and agrees. They shake hands and then Ally asks what "learning differences" are. Mr. Daniels likens it to how there are multiple ways to get somewhere; there are different ways the brain processes things. He says that Ally has trouble learning words with just her eyes, so she's going to learn with other senses. Ally is a visual learner—which is why she's a good artist and good at chess—so they're going to write letters with her whole body. He asks her to cover a metal sheet with shaving cream so that she can write huge letters with her finger. Ally feels hopeful.

Mr. Daniels's habit of shaking hands with students when they make agreements like this shows that, first and foremost, he views his students as people worthy of his respect. He understands that they need to buy in fully when he introduces opportunities like this, as if Ally isn't entirely on board and participating fully, his lessons won't be nearly as effective.



CHAPTER 32: SCREEN TIME

When Ally leaves school later, Mom and Travis are waiting for her in the car—they're going to a friend's house so that they can Skype with Dad. Ally tries to control her excitement. Mom seems ready to cry as Ally tells Dad about Mr. Daniels, Ally, Keisha, and Shay. Then, Ally says goodbye and Travis has his turn. Travis isn't as happy as Ally; he tells Dad that he has a new manager at the auto shop who makes Travis look things up in the manual. Travis says the new manager doesn't get him and seems to barely believe Dad's praise and encouragement.

Ally and Travis leave so that Mom and Dad can talk in private. Travis tells Ally that he's so frustrated with work and though he talks about restoring old Coke machines and having Nickerson Restoration, he doesn't seem happy or hopeful. Ally tries to think of how she can help before Mom calls them back to say goodbye to Dad.

Mom's emotions here offer the reader some insight into how hard she must have to work as an effectively single parent, especially when both her children have learning disabilities. This shows that, intentional or not, Ally's parents aren't truly able to be there for her and Travis. Though Mom and Dad seem supportive, they must rely on people like Mr. Daniels to truly advocate for their children.



Now that things are looking up for Ally, she can begin to expand her thinking outwards to other people and can brainstorm how to help them with their problems. This illustrates how difficult it can be to be a good friend when one is dealing with the weight of not being able to read.



CHAPTER 33: POSSIBILITIES

Ally's afternoons with Mr. Daniels get easier because she's happy, but the work is hard. She struggles to understand that "cat" has three separate sounds and worries she'll never read a full book. After one lesson, Mr. Daniels asks Ally how she's feeling. Ally says she's happy to do the extra work, but it still feels like it'll be impossible to read like the other kids. With a serious look, he writes "impossible" on a piece of paper. Then, he draws a red line between the m and the p and tells her to rip it there, and then asks her to throw the "im" in the trash. Ally looks Mr. Daniels in the eye as she does so, trying to tell him with her eyes how grateful she is. He sends Ally off and she leaves, still holding the "possible" paper in her hand. She wants to believe.

Even though Ally doesn't mention her Sketchbook of Impossible Things here, Mr. Daniels's lesson with "impossible" begins to show Ally that what she once thought were things only for her sketchbook can now happen in her real life. This shows what kind of doors can be opened once someone is allowed to believe they're smart and given the appropriate tools to help them make up for where they struggle.



CHAPTER 34: BIRTH OF A STAR

After school a few days later, Keisha and Ally go to Albert's house. Ally still has "possible" in her pocket. Albert introduces his nervous and surprised mother, Audrey, and refuses her offer of food. As they race up the stairs, Keisha said she would've liked some food. Albert tells her that the fridge is empty and unplugged. Both Ally and Keisha apologize that Albert doesn't have food at home, but Albert says that filling the fridge isn't his responsibility and therefore, he has no reason to feel bad about it.

Again, Albert can attempt to look at things logically and rationalize his poverty all he wants, but he nonetheless appears a bit embarrassed that he can't give his friends a snack. This begins to show how poverty can also take a hit on a person's self esteem, just as Ally's dyslexia does for her.



Ally looks around Albert's sparsely furnished room and the many science posters on his wall. She points to one poster of space and asks what it is. Albert says that it's the birth of a star, and Keisha tells Albert that he'll grow up to be a star. Ally starts to look serious and sad, which Keisha notices. Ally hesitates before telling her friends that she has trouble with reading and writing. Keisha insists that they don't care. Ally continues that Mr. Daniels says she has dyslexia, and he's been helping her after school. Mumbling, she says that she's afraid that she'll grow up to be a nobody, since her goal is just to be able to read a restaurant menu.

Albert pauses and then says if nobody's perfect, then logically, Ally *must* be perfect. Keisha laughs and also tells Ally she's perfect. Albert says that he's struggling to find the origins of the saying "be yourself," since it doesn't make sense if you don't know who you are. He says he knows what kind of an adult he wants to be, but he doesn't know who he is now—and others are happy to tell him he's a nerd or a wimp.

Albert asks Ally if she'd rather be in a tank with a killer whale or a stonefish. When she says the stonefish, Albert says this is the wrong answer—killer whales never attack people, while stonefish are extremely venomous. He says people are only afraid of killer whales because they're not called friendly whales. Ally thinks of how words are powerful; they can be used for good, or they can be used to hurt.

Because Ally believed until very recently that even reading a menu was beyond her reach, she's understandably having trouble realizing that if she continues to work with Mr. Daniels, she'll soon be able to read all sorts of things with much less trouble. This indicates that she's in the middle of her development here, as she recognizes that reading a menu is now within her grasp—but doesn't yet believe that books or more complex reading material is.



Albert's musings encapsulate the project of being a teen at all: figuring out which voices to listen to and learning how to listen to his own voice. This reinforces that Albert, Ally, Keisha, and their other classmates are all at a natural turning point in their development, and their identities are things they can control.



The comment about killer whales impresses upon Ally how important it is to think carefully about the words she uses to describe herself and others. She realizes now that others are wrong to call her dumb, but she also understands that those words have a great deal of power.



CHAPTER 35: A PICTURE IS WORTH A GAZILLION WORDS

The next day at school, there's a sub. Ally thinks of how she can get out of class to go to the nurse as the sub asks who Ally Nickerson is. Ally raises her hand, and the sub says that she can draw instead of write in response to the prompt. Shay snidely says that after Ally colors, she can have naptime. The sub doesn't stop Shay and hands out paper. Ally is mortified and can't figure out why Mr. Daniels betrayed her. She gets up and walks out, telling the angry sub she drew a picture of a ghost in a blizzard.

Ally goes right to Mrs. Silver's office, where she asks Mrs. Silver to call Mom. Ally doesn't even know why she's asking and takes the phone when Mrs. Silver holds it out to her. Ally tries not to cry as she thinks that she's tired of being a failure and feels hurt that Mr. Daniels betrayed her. All she can say is "Mom?" Mom asks for Mrs. Silver again. Ally goes to the bathroom to cry and then asks Keisha to help her write a note for Mr. Daniels, saying that she'll never read or play chess with him again.

Just as with what happened at the Noah Webster museum, the sub's actions and unwillingness to stop Shay from being mean return the classroom to a dangerous and horrible place for Ally. This reminds the reader that while students can be empowered to stop bullying, the teachers also have a great deal of responsibility to create an environment unfriendly to bullying in the first place.



Ally's sense of betrayal is so intense because, after months of learning to trust Mr. Daniels and now weeks of working with him one-on-one, Ally has started to believe that teachers can and will look out for her. This makes Mr. Daniels's supposed betrayal hurt even more.



That afternoon, Ally sits down at Petersen's and wonders what Mom will say about the phone call. Mom compliments Ally on her "ghost in a blizzard" line and listens as Ally says that Mr. Daniels was the first teacher she trusted. Mom encourages her to give Mr. Daniels a chance and that he probably didn't intend to hurt her. Ally hopes she's right.

The fact that Ally wants to believe Mom and forgive Mr. Daniels indicates that Ally finds trusting teachers to be way better than thinking of them as enemies. In other words, she hopes that her much improved life at school will continue.



CHAPTER 36: IN THE GAME OF LIFE...

The next morning, Mr. Daniels calls Ally into the hallway. He says that he never intended for the sub to single her out; she wasn't meant to read the note out loud. He says he'd never hurt Ally on purpose. Ally is relieved as Mr. Daniels asks for her forgiveness and holds out his hand. She shakes it.

This experience will likely remind Mr. Daniels that not all educators think the way that he does about confidentiality and treating kids kindly—which means that in the future, his sub notes can offer him a place to teach this to subs.



That afternoon as Ally and Mr. Daniels play chess, Ally thinks that Keisha is like a bishop—able to move quickly. Albert is a king; valuable, but very slow. Ally is the knight, which moves in an L shape. Shay is a queen, given her ability to scare others. Ally thinks that dealing with Shay is like playing chess, as she's always looking for a person's weakness, but the board is always changing. Mr. Daniels pulls Ally back to reality and Ally sees her move. She moves her knight and checks Mr. Daniels's king. When he admits defeat, Ally asks if he let her win. He assures her that with three little brothers, he's not capable of that.

By learning to think about her friends and about Shay's bullying in terms of chess, Ally is able to think about it in a way that makes sense to her and turns it into a problem she knows she can solve. This shows that Mr. Daniels has reached his possible goal of helping Ally feel confident and successful, as this will presumably give her the confidence to go on and better handle Shay's bullying.



CHAPTER 37: A CHICKEN, A WOLF, AND A PROBLEM

On Friday, Mr. Daniels gives his class a puzzle: they must move a chicken, a wolf, and bag of grain across a river, one at a time, and without leaving the chicken alone with the grain or the wolf alone with the chicken. Oliver thinks he knows, but he can't keep the chicken from getting eaten. Suki struggles, as does Albert, and then Mr. Daniels lets the class work on it on their own. Ally asks to go into the hallway to escape the noise, though Jessica and Shay soon join her. They think the puzzle is dumb. Shay holds up signs for Ally to read, but Ally ignores them both.

Ally's request to work in the hallway where it's quieter shows that she's learning how to advocate for herself to give herself the best possible chance of success. It is puzzling why Mr. Daniels let Shay into the hallway with Ally given what he's observed of her behavior, though it's also possible that he now believes Ally has the skills and the confidence to effectively stand up to her.



Shay moves closer, tells Ally that she's stupid, and says that Mr. Daniels is only nice because he feels bad for her. Jessica squeakily suggests they go back inside, but Shay snaps at her. Ally notes the fear in Jessica's voice and goes into the classroom herself to sit behind Mr. Daniels's desk. She reminds herself that just because Shay said something, that doesn't make it true. After a little while, Ally solves the puzzle. Mr. Daniels lets her help her classmates and though Max asks for help and Jessica smiles, Shay calls Ally a loser again.

Jessica's suggestion implies that Shay's reign of terror is almost over, since her most loyal follower seems as though she's not on board with this bullying. Whatever Mr. Daniels's intentions, Ally's ability to tell herself that Shay isn't always right shows that Mr. Daniels's lessons have given Ally the confidence to trust her own voice and turn off Shay's.



Mr. Daniels calls the class to attention and says the puzzle had two components: solving the puzzle and sticking with it. He says that regardless of how smart a person is, hard work is still important. Ally thinks that having trouble with something isn't the same as not being able to do it.

The moral of this lesson gives Ally another way to look at academics: she can succeed, she'll just have to try harder to do well. Especially since she was the only one to finish the problem, this helps her decide to believe it.



CHAPTER 38: LOSER FOR PRESIDENT

Mr. Daniels asks the students if they have nominations for class president. Jessica nominates Shay and no one else is willing to run, given that Shay has made it clear that any opponents will regret trying. Shay raises her hand and nominates Ally. Mr. Daniels tells Ally that she can say no, but he thinks she could run. She agrees to run and learns that she'll need to write a speech for the next day. Mr. Daniels can't help her after school but suggests that she ask Mom. Ally knows that Mom would help but is afraid that it would get Mom's hopes up too high.

Again, Mr. Daniels's willingness to let Shay nominate Ally (which looks like a poorly disguised attempt to make Ally feel inferior) suggests that Mr. Daniels is aware that change is almost upon his class. Ally's trust in him implies (hopefully) that he wouldn't knowingly let Shay hurt her, which in turn offers some hope that Ally may actually win.



Ally sits at her dining room table, desperately wanting to ask Mom for help. She sees a mind movie of winning the election, so she tries her best to write a speech. She writes two paragraphs in an hour and a half and hopes for a fever in the morning.

Remember that Ally still has trouble reading, which means that she'll likely struggle to read what she's written. This suggests that Ally doesn't yet have the confidence to do what's best for her in these situations.



CHAPTER 39: TO-SHAY

The next morning, Albert brushes off Keisha's questions about his new black eye and offers Ally a sign he made that reads, "Ally is your ally." He explains that Ally's name is a homonym. Shay waltzes by and says that at least Ally will get three votes, but Ally thinks that she, Albert, and Keisha are like the primary colors: able to create all the other colors. Ally tells Albert that she knows she's going to lose, but she's happy to have a poster. Albert tells Ally that she can keep it if she doesn't give up. Ally tells Albert that he can't give up either—he needs to stand up to the bullies.

Ally's ability to think of herself and her friends as being like primary colors shows that she also recognizes that the three of them do have the power to create change in the classroom. They can shift opinions about bullying by setting an example and by being trendsetters. As far as Keisha is concerned, this needs to begin with Albert standing up for himself—which will, in turn, send a message to the classroom bullies too.



Albert and Keisha give Ally one more pep talk and then, Mr. Daniels calls Shay to give her speech. Shay's campaign promises are impossible, like bigger lockers and extra recess, but everyone applauds. Ally feels small as she walks to the front of her class. She stares at her speech but can't read it. Mr. Daniels leans forward, tells Ally she can do this, and slides her paper out of her hands. He prompts her through her first few sentences and then Ally is talking on her own. She says she'd like to help magnify everyone's ideas and won't make promises she can't keep.

When Ally recognizes that Shay's campaign promises will be impossible to carry out, she sees where she may actually have an advantage: Ally can make promises she knows she can keep, such as listening to everyone. Shay's promises, on the other hand, symbolize how out of touch she is with reality and with her classmates. She recognizes that her promises are great in theory, but crumble under closer scrutiny.



Mr. Daniels says it's time for the vote and passes out scraps of paper. When Shay says that other classes are voting by raising hands and secret voting isn't fair, Mr. Daniels says he'd like to make it like a real election. Ally has a lump in her throat as she writes her name. The class begs for Mr. Daniels to count the ballots in front of them, so he does. Ally is surprised when she wins—she thought everyone loved Shay. Shay is quiet and glares at Ally, and Max suggests they throw a party.

Once again, Mr. Daniels seems to be aware that Shay would like to use the election to bully people, so the secret ballots are a way for him to rob her of some of her power. This suggests that Mr. Daniels is aware that when given the opportunity to say what they think about Shay in private, most of the class will vote for her.



CHAPTER 40: TEARS OF DIFFERENT KINDS

Keisha and Albert call Ally Madam President all day. Ally is happy until the end of the day, when she hears Shay's mom berating Shay for losing. Shay cries and sounds like a small child. Ally feels bad for her, but Keisha says that having a mean parent isn't an excuse to be mean to others.

The behavior of Shay's mom shows that Shay's behavior doesn't take place in a vacuum; she's likely learned this behavior from a parent who also prioritizes popularity and winning over all else.



Ally runs into Petersen's and almost shouts that she won the election for class president. Mom is confused and then cries happy tears as she envelops Ally in a hug. The regulars also congratulate Ally.

Ally and Mom's happiness shows how important it can be to feel loved by one's classmates—it creates waves that extend to Ally's family.



CHAPTER 41: NOT-SO-SECRET LETTER

When Ally wakes up the next morning, she knows immediately she's class president. She finds an envelope on her desk at school. It's not from Mr. Daniels; it's in cursive and has Max's name at the bottom. Ally can't read it, so she slides it away and decides to try to read it later. She doesn't tell Keisha about it, fearing that Keisha will make a big fuss. Ally also wonders if she might actually like Max.

The letter makes Ally feel as though she truly has a chance at being a normal kid who experiences romance like anyone else, though her inability to read the letter shows her that in this regard, she'll still have to work harder than everyone else.



Mr. Daniels calls the class to order and then tells everyone that if they have suggestions for Ally, they should let her know so she can take their concerns to the meeting in the afternoon. Oliver approaches Ally first and says he wants to be able to bring candy for snacks. Later, Ally hears Shay saying that if she'd been elected, she would've started an equestrian club. Ally feels bad for a minute before she realizes that's another impossible promise. Ally thinks of all the clubs she could start and sees a mind movie of her, Keisha, and Albert riding a rocket. Shay pulls Ally back to earth by telling her that everyone thinks Ally should crawl in a hole. She stomps off when Ally points out that since lots of people voted for her, not everyone feels that way.

Now that Ally feels like she has the support of her classmates, it's much easier for her to see Shay's behavior as bluster and an act, not anything that should be taken seriously. This shows that Ally is simultaneously learning to trust her own voice and her own beliefs, which now tell her that she's valuable, not dumb. These also indicate that Ally is developing critical thinking skills, which will eventually help her be a better reader, as well as a better friend and engaged citizen.



As Ally prepares to board her bus, Shay and Jessica stomp over and ask if Ally got the letter. Ally can't figure out why Shay even knows about the letter and an alarm goes off in her head. She asks what letter, and Shay impatiently whispers that the letter was from Max, asking Ally to meet him for lunch. She says Max is disappointed. Ally says nothing as she watches Max approach. Shay continues to say that Max likes Ally and Ally has to write back. Shay is very surprised when Max appears next to her and asks what she's talking about. Ally says that Shay thinks that Max wrote her a love letter, but she's too busy for romance. Max looks angrily at Shay and Jessica, and Ally is grateful she couldn't read.

Though Ally's inability to read is extremely lucky in this situation, this still indicates that until Ally learns to read better, she'll be at risk for things like this that Shay might pull. Fortunately, Max's displeasure with Shay and Jessica suggests that the tide is turning, and Shay no longer is in charge like she used to be. This shows that Mr. Daniels's insistence that bullying will not be tolerated is now being policed by empowered students as well as by him.



CHAPTER 42: THE GIFTS OF NO EXCUSES, SCOTCH TAPE, AND ANTIBIOTICS

Mr. Daniels calls Ally to his desk to give her something. Ally is excited until she sees that it's a book. She doesn't hate them anymore, but she's still scared of them. Mr. Daniels asks Ally to read it and stops her before she can make excuses. He says that she *can* read this one, and he'd like her to try. She flips through it and tells the reader that Mr. Daniels could hand her a massive book and she'd try to read it, just because he asked.

Ally's insistence that she'd try to read whatever book Mr. Daniels gives her speaks to the degree to which she now trusts her teacher: she trusts, first of all, that he won't give her something impossible, and even if he does, she wants to please badly enough to try anyway.



Mr. Daniels introduces a unit on persuasive writing by asking students to tell him what they'd like to have an unlimited amount of. Shay says she'd choose money, but Albert says he'd have antibiotics. He says that he could give them out to people who need them. Shay is incredulous and points out that with money, Albert could just buy the antibiotics. Oliver yells that he'd want tape—he says that life would be harder without it. He also suggests he'd like white glue. Shay says this is ridiculous. Mr. Daniels tries to tell Shay to respect Oliver, but they talk over him and Oliver says he'd use tape and glue to make notes for his little sister to help her feel better. He says that she used to be sick with something bad and was at the hospital a lot, but his cards made her feel better.

With this conversation, Shay's outlook on life starts to look even further removed from those of her classmates. Though she doesn't say what she'd do with all of her money, it's also telling that she doesn't say—while both Albert and Oliver cite helping others when they talk about the things they'd like to have. Shay's desire for money also ignores the possibility that antibiotics (or tape, for that matter) might not always be available. Wishing for an unlimited supply of antibiotics means that humans will never be without.



Mr. Daniels tells Oliver he's one of a kind. Suki raises her hand and says that according to her grandfather, everyone is unique and that makes them all great. Albert points out that E. coli is unique and very dangerous, but Mr. Daniels insists that it'd be boring if people were all the same. Ally thinks that she'd like to be more like everyone else, but adds that she wouldn't want to act like Shay or Jessica.

Mr. Daniels's assertion that it's important for everyone to be different encapsulates his philosophy as a teacher: to accept his students as individuals worthy of respect and consideration, and not to treat them like faceless automatons.



Suddenly, Oliver starts screaming that Shay is an ant murderer for stepping on an ant, saying she had no right to kill him. Oliver carefully picks up the dead ant in a tissue and says he's going to bury it. Shay starts laughing but stops immediately when Mr. Daniels sternly reprimands her. He says they all need to work to accept each other and asks Oliver to apologize to Shay, since it's common for people to kill ants. After Oliver does so, Mr. Daniels tells Oliver that his kind heart will make him a great man.

In both praising and reprimanding Oliver, Mr. Daniels indicates that being so kind and giving won't always be easy for Oliver—but also suggests that it's still worthwhile and noble to strive to be so kind. When he shuts down Shay's bullying, he also reminds the class that while Oliver may be exaggerating, his kindness is still more desirable.



CHAPTER 43: SET THE WORLD ON FIRE

Because Keisha and Ally are bothered by all the teasing that Albert gets for his shirt, they make two shirts for themselves so that they match. Ally wears a shirt that says "steel," while Keisha wears one that says "magnesium." Albert is confused but Keisha explains that between the three of them, they can set the world on fire, like Mr. Daniels is always telling them to do. Albert almost smiles, and Ally yells to Shay that if she teases one of them, she teases all of them. They laugh at the look on Shay's face and tell Albert that he can count on them. He says quietly that he's grateful.

Steel, flint, and magnesium can all be used to start fires. By wearing shirts that match Albert's, Ally and Keisha are able to physically show him that they're his friends and will stand with him, no matter what. Ally's choice to yell at Shay illustrates how much more confident Ally now is: it's no longer a terrifying proposition to stand up for her friends.



CHAPTER 44: TALES OF A SIXTH GRADE SOMETHING

Travis drives Ally to school because her book report project, a diorama about *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, the book Mr. Daniels asked her to read, is too big. Travis is surprised that Ally looks so happy to go to school on a Monday. At school, Shay asks how Ally made a kitchen scene with a working light. Oliver grabs for the light and knocks the wire, turning it off. Shay begins to yell at him, but Ally stops her and says she can fix it. Shay stands for a moment and then laughs that she read the book years ago, and points at a picture of a soldier in one of the rooms and says there are no soldiers in the book.

Given what the reader knows of Shay, she certainly isn't preparing to yell at Oliver on Ally's behalf—she likely sees Oliver's mistake as a prime excuse to torment her for her own gain. This is supported when Shay then turns to picking apart something else and trying to make Ally feel lesser for reading a book at a lower grade level, which suggests that Shay may feel more insecure than she lets on.



Max walks over to see what's going on, and Shay points out that Ally is making stuff up about the book she read. Ally explains that since most houses have art on the walls, she included a picture of Dad in his uniform. Max is excited to hear that Ally's dad drives a tank in the Army, fist bumps Ally, and then tells everyone about Ally's dad. Shay looks angry. Mr. Daniels tells Ally he's proud of her and Ally thinks that she's never heard that from a teacher before.

Max's interest in Ally's dad means that Shay's attempts to bully Ally backfire spectacularly, which in turn makes Shay look even less popular and cool to her peers. The fact that Ally has never been told by a teacher that they're proud of her reinforces how fortunate she is to finally have a teacher willing to work with her.



CHAPTER 45: MY BROTHER'S QUESTION

Ally draws pictures of talking cupcakes for Keisha's baking business. She thinks about how she still loves her **Sketchbook of Impossible Things**, but it's not the only thing that makes her happy anymore and that feels good.

Ally hears Travis chewing gum and tells him to chew quietly. Instead of firing back, he just looks stiff and stands in her doorway. He nervously asks Ally what she does with Mr. Daniels to help her read. Ally tells him about some of the exercises and says it's still hard to read, but it's getting easier. She says he also gives her colored plastic sheets to read through, which helps with the headaches. Travis smiles and says he's happy that Ally has friends and is improving. Ally tells Travis he's doing great and will have Nickerson Restoration soon, but he doesn't say anything. Ally offers to try to help Travis, but he declines.

Now that Mr. Daniels has given Ally confidence and the skills to succeed in the real world, she no longer has to rely on her Sketchbook to think about her dreams.



Travis's question confirms that he likely has dyslexia as well, but he's not yet willing to ask for help about it. Asking his younger sister about her exercises is a very low-stakes way to learn about what could be possible for him, which suggests that Travis could soon be ready to ask for help. The fact that Ally seems optimistic even with the struggles she has with reading speaks to the power of finally feeling capable of being successful.



CHAPTER 46: FLYING TIGERS AND BABY ELEPHANTS

At lunch, Albert says he used to call Ally the Flying Tiger after pre-World War Two airplanes with shark teeth painted on the nose. Pilots used to repaint the planes, which made the enemy think there were more than there actually were. Albert says that Ally used to figure out how to "repaint" herself for teachers. Keisha asks if he had a nickname for her. Albert is quiet and then says he called Keisha The Baby. Keisha is offended, but Albert says that when Keisha is quiet, she takes everything in, but when she's loud, she gets what she wants. Ally says it's perfect.

Ally asks if Albert has a nickname for himself. He does; he calls himself the Elephant. It's not because he's big or because he has a good memory, it's because elephants have thick skin. He says that happy and sad often look the same on an elephant. Ally thinks that she's believed Albert doesn't feel anything, when really, he feels everything.

Albert's nicknames for his friends show that he's far more interested in the world around him than Ally has thus far given him credit for. He definitely has Ally figured out, even before they'd said more than a few words to each other. All of this works together to suggest that Albert desperately wants to connect and is very tuned in to the people around him.



Albert's own nickname confirms this: he prides himself on his ability to look as though he's not bothered by things, because it makes those things easier to deal with. With friends, he doesn't have to pretend.



CHAPTER 47: GREAT MINDS DON'T THINK ALIKE

Mr. Daniels introduces a new social studies unit on famous people. He stands up photos at the front of the room and says he'll give out names, but the class has to say why those people are famous. The people include Thomas Edison, George Washington, Henry Ford, and Albert Einstein. Albert talks about Einstein and says that he's named after Einstein. They go through more people and then Mr. Daniels asks if the class would call any of those people stupid. Mr. Daniels says that Einstein was kicked out of school and couldn't tie his shoes. Ally remembers how she also struggled to tie her shoes.

Mr. Daniels talks about some of the other people's contributions to the world and then says that most of these people are believed to have dyslexia. He says that their minds just work differently; they weren't stupid. Mr. Daniels writes a jumble of letters on the board and says it's an extra credit assignment. It's a code, and anyone who can crack the code will begin to understand how hard it is to read with dyslexia.

As the bell rings, Ally stays seated, looking at the pictures. She wonders if those people believed they were stupid. Mr. Daniels kneels in front of her and asks if she's okay, and Ally asks him to confirm that they all had dyslexia. He gives her a paperweight inscribed with "Never, never, never quit. Winston Churchill" on it. Mr. Daniels says it's not a reminder to not give up; it's to tell her that he's noticed that she's working hard and that she's going to be okay.

With this lesson, Mr. Daniels shows that he recognizes that his class has undergone a seismic shift: where once Shay might have co-opted this lesson and turned it into an excuse to make fun of Ally and Oliver, he knows that with Shay currently on the outs, the class is ready to hear that they're all special and thinking differently isn't a bad thing. In this way, the novel ties a lack of bullying to being able to actually learn.



The fact that all of these people had dyslexia (as opposed to other learning, behavior, or physical disabilities) makes this lesson mostly about trying to make Ally's struggles real for the class, given that Mr. Daniels is certainly aware that the class knows Ally struggles to read.



Mr. Daniels shows that he understands that for Ally, working hard is something she's more than willing to do—what's more important for her is to know that she's seen and appreciated. This shows that he recognizes that just learning to read is not even half the battle; social success is sometimes more important.



CHAPTER 48: OLIVER'S IDEA OF LUCKY

The next morning, Oliver asks Ally what it's like to have dyslexia. He wants to know if she sees things backwards. Ally says that letters flutter, and Oliver's eyes widen with awe. He says that his letters just stand there and are boring, so he hates reading. Ally smiles, thinking that she's never realized how funny he is since she's been so caught up in herself. She looks around the room and remembers thinking that her reading differences were like dragging around a concrete block. Now, she realizes that everyone has a block to drag. The blocks are all different, and they're all heavy. Ally thinks of how Mr. Daniels used "grit" to describe the people with dyslexia. He said that grit is being willing to fail, and Ally thinks that she'll be bothered less by messing up now.

Oliver's question shows that he holds a number of misconceptions about dyslexia; this is going to be a learning process for everyone. When Ally realizes how funny Oliver is, it shows that now that she's doing well in school and isn't a social outcast, she's able to think about her classmates in a more meaningful way. This suggests that she may also learn to see that Shay is more human than not and is just a human who's making mean choices.



Later, on the playground, Shay comes over and asks if Ally sees letter backwards. Ally now feels proud of her dyslexia, but it bugs her when Shay says that her brother in kindergarten sees letters the right way. Albert says that seeing letters backwards is a sign of intelligence. He says that he sees some backwards and he's smart, so Ally must be even smarter. Shay bites and asks what letters Albert sees backwards. He says he sees O, T, A V, U, and others backwards.

Shay stomps off, but her followers only follow her halfheartedly. Jessica even jogs back and tells Ally that dyslexia is cool, that Ally is a good artist, and that she's sorry for everything. Keisha turns to Albert and asks him what's up with Jessica being nice. Then, Keisha starts laughing about how Shay went for Albert's trick—the letters he listed are the same forward and backward. Ally laughs and thanks Albert.

Ally finds a wooden A on her desk. Suki explains that she carved it for Ally from one of her blocks because Ally is amazing and she admires her. Ally hears Shay sounding unhappy across the room. She looks and sees a pile of **friendship bracelets** on Shay's desk.

CHAPTER 49: I SEE THE LIGHT

During break time, Ally watches her classmates. They're all occupied except for Shay, who's just sitting and watching. Oliver goes around and asks everyone to put their arms up, spell "image," and then say "light bulb," and when they do, he jumps up. Shay surprisingly plays along, but she calls Oliver a freak after. Ally is happy to see that Oliver doesn't look sad after Shay says that. Ally wonders if Shay now knows what it's like to be alone in a room full of people, so she goes to talk to her. Shay looks upset and tells Ally to bother someone else. Ally is shocked, but then decides that Shay is the one deciding to be mean. She feels sorry for Shay.

CHAPTER 50: A HERO'S JOB

As Keisha, Albert, and Ally walk home, they hear a voice behind yelling for "brain" to wait up. Albert turns white and Ally looks behind them to see three boys running towards them. The bullies tease Albert about having a girlfriend, push Albert, and push Keisha to the ground when she stands up for him. Albert tells the bullies to leave Keisha alone as one of the boys dumps out Keisha's bag. Albert finally fights back: he pushes and hits two of the boys and when they stop fighting back, tells them that they're never to touch his friends again. Keisha picks up her things and she and Ally follow Albert.

Again, Shay's desire to feel superior to Ally manifests in trying to take Ally down, not just in trying to make herself do better. Albert's attempt to trick Shay shows that, like Ally, Albert is now more confident in his own social abilities and standing and no longer fears the backlash of standing up for others.



Jessica's choice to come back to say something nice to Ally indicates that Jessica is finally willing to start thinking for herself and not following Shay blindly. With this, Jessica will be able to go on and undergo her own process of coming of age on her own terms.



The abandoned friendship bracelets symbolize Shay's final downfall—now, it's clear to everyone that nobody actually likes Shay or wants to be her friend.



When Oliver doesn't look upset after Shay calls him a freak, it shows that just like Ally and Albert, he is also benefitting from the environment that Mr. Daniels has created in the classroom. Because Mr. Daniels has told him that he matters and is important, Oliver now believes it and doesn't feel the need to listen to Shay say otherwise. Ally's attempt to engage with Shay shows how kind and empathetic she is: she understands that kindness and friendship can dissolve the loneliness.



The choice to finally stand up for himself and for his friends shows that Albert has finally undergone the same process that Ally did: he now sees that he's valuable, and that his friends are worth fighting for. This will in turn help him develop his sense of self-worth, as this one experience will help Albert see that when push comes to shove, it's important to stand up for what's right.



Ally feels ready to cry as she thinks about all of Albert's bruises and the fact that the one thing capable of making him fight was standing up for his friends. Keisha compliments Albert on his strength and bravery, and Albert says that Albert's dad speaks against violence but also says it's wrong to hit girls. Albert stops and says he would've done everything to stop them from hurting his friends.

Albert's reasoning illustrates the power of his friendships: while this event will certainly help Albert think more kindly about himself, he also now knows deep inside that his friends are worth fighting for, no matter what he or his dad think.



At Petersen's, Albert seems taller and Keisha keeps acting out the fight. Ally pulls out her social studies homework and says that even says she only has to do half of the questions, she wants to try them all. She's discovered tricks that make reading easier and she wants to try them out. Albert says that kind of thinking reminds him of Teddy Roosevelt. Ally then compliments Albert for his bravery again, but Albert says that he's not brave like Ally. He says that he almost wishes he had dyslexia too, since some of the greatest minds in the world have it. Keisha says that Albert is a good friend.

Now that Ally knows she won't be punished for trying—and indeed, won't be forced to do things that make her head hurt or feel impossible—she has the strength to try things, even knowing that they'll be hard. When Albert admits that he almost wishes he had dyslexia, it completes the novel's project of looking at dyslexia as though it's a superpower and not a bad thing, which can in turn make it seem desirable.



CHAPTER 51: C-O-U-R-A-GENIUS

Ally asks Mr. Daniels if she can renew her library book, which makes him extremely happy. He tells her yes and then gives her an envelope to take to Mrs. Silver. He says that she has to give it to her in person and bring the response back. Mrs. Silver greets Ally warmly as Ally holds out the envelope, but Mrs. Silver needs to make a phone call first. Ally sees the poster that she couldn't read earlier in the school year. She holds the envelope under the first line and starts to sound out the first words.

Again, now that Ally knows she won't be punished for trying things and isn't in constant conflict with Mrs. Silver, she feels comfortable trying to read this poster in front of Mrs. Silver. With this, Ally demonstrates that she's learned that needing to read in a different way isn't something to be ashamed of; she needs to own it or she'll never learn.



Mrs. Silver comes up behind Ally, puts her hands on Ally's shoulders, and asks her to keep going. Ally asks Mrs. Silver to read it to her once first. Mrs. Silver reads that the bravest thing a person can do is to ask for help. She then apologizes for not picking up on the dyslexia sooner and says she's proud of everything Ally's done. Ally thinks that she should've asked for help long ago, but she wasn't brave enough then.

Asking Mrs. Silver to read the poster is an indicator that Ally trusts her principal. Mrs. Silver's apology shows how easy it is for kids like Ally to slip through the cracks, especially when they move as much as Ally has and don't have as much time to get to know their teachers.



Ally hands over the envelope. Mrs. Silver laughs when she opens it, saying that the note reads that Ally is the student of the month. Ally is ecstatic and runs back to the classroom. Mr. Daniels announces that Ally is the student of the month and the class applauds. Shay says something that Ally can't hear, but Jessica tells Shay to stop.

In particular, Jessica's willingness to stop Shay from saying mean things shows that Jessica now feels safe choosing kindness and no longer feels the pressure to follow Shay. Shay is now wholly alone, which hopefully will mean that she'll begin to shift her thinking to fit in.



Ally stays after school waiting for Travis, who's driving her and her big project home. Seeing Travis, everything suddenly makes sense to Ally: Travis is smart, just like she is. She throws her arms around him and then asks him to wait. Ally races back to her classroom and right up to Mr. Daniels's desk. She pulls out the piece of paper that says "possible" and asks Mr. Daniels to help Travis learn to read too. Mr. Daniels says he'll be there in a minute to talk with her and Travis. Ally feels grateful for Mr. Daniels and thinks that she'll set the world on fire now.

Ally walks back to the gym and then hands Travis the piece of paper with "possible" on it. Mr. Daniels arrives a moment later, introduces himself, and compliments Ally. He explains what they do after school and invites Travis to join them. Ally sees a mind movie of Nickerson Restoration as well as one of her being happy in her future. She knows that those movies won't go in her **Sketchbook of Impossible Things**, because now, they're actually going to happen. Everything seems possible.

Now that Ally has gone through this journey of identifying her disability and learning that it's not a bad thing, she can pay Mr. Daniels's kindness forward by helping Travis identify his dyslexia and learn to conquer it too. In this way, the novel suggests that people like Ally will lead the future of disability conversations and be able to most effectively help others.



Because Mr. Daniels has given Ally the confidence that she can accomplish great things, if only she tries and has the right tools, she understands that nothing is impossible. By recognizing that her Sketchbook of Impossible Things was actually holding her back, Ally can now look forward to her future where she can actually do anything.





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