

Don't Call Me Ishmael



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL GERARD BAUER

Michael Gerard Bauer was born in Brisbane, Australia. He studied English literature in college and then became an economics and English teacher in Brisbane. Bauer taught for decades until he quit his job to write his first novel, *The Running Man*, which was published in 2005. *The Running Man* won a number of awards in Australia and elsewhere, and it jumpstarted Bauer's career as an author of young adult fiction. *Don't Call Me Ishmael* was his second book; his son designed the cover art for the original Australian edition. Bauer has continued to publish about a book per year since then—some for middle-grade readers, some for younger readers, and several picture books. His novels have been translated into many different languages and published all over the world. Bauer has said that he doesn't have the opportunity to write every day, since he spends a lot of his time speaking to school groups and attending literary festivals. He also maintains a blog and interacts with fans on Facebook. He and his wife, who was also a teacher, live in Brisbane.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ishmael is so focused on his own problems that he doesn't mention much of what's going on in the outside world—though he does reference many well-known superhero, fantasy, and sci-fi franchises, such as *Harry Potter*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *X-Men*, which situate the novel as taking place in the early 2000s. Much of the focus in *Don't Call Me Ishmael* is on bullying and its effects on students in schools. In Australia, anti-discrimination and anti-bullying legislation first started to pass in the mid-1970s. Today, many countries—including Australia—teach anti-bullying programs in schools. And while in some countries, such as the UK, there's no formal definition of what bullying is, some U.S. states have laws banning specific types of bullying. Current research suggests that bullying can increase rates of depression in victims, which can in turn lead to an increased risk of suicide. Disabled or minority students are at a higher risk of being bullied.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Don't Call Me Ishmael is the first in a trilogy about Ishmael and his debating friends at St. Daniel's. It's followed by *Ishmael and the Return of the Dugongs* and *Ishmael and the Hoops of Steel*. And, of course, *Ishmael* takes Herman Melville's classic 1851 novel *Moby-Dick* as its inspiration (*Don't Call Me Ishmael*'s protagonist is named after *Moby-Dick*'s narrator). Books like

Dear Miss Karana by Eric Elliott and *These Violent Delights* by Chloe Gong are other contemporary young adult novels that take classic novels as their inspiration (Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, respectively). In interviews, Bauer has said that as a kid, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy were some of his favorite books. And though he insists he's not purposefully writing for a specific audience, he's also said that he tries to write funny books that will appeal specifically to boys. In this way, Bauer shares some similarities with children's author Roald Dahl (who was insistent that children's books should be humorous, not serious), who wrote classics like *James and the Giant Peach* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Other young adult and children's novels that tackle similar themes of bullying, difference, and friendship include *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, and *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio. Within the novel, Scobie also reads from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, and the debating team mentions J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Don't Call Me Ishmael
- **When Written:** 2005
- **Where Written:** Brisbane, Australia
- **When Published:** 2006
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel, Bildungsroman, Issue Novel
- **Setting:** St. Daniel's School for Boys, an Australian secondary school
- **Climax:** Ishmael chooses not to embarrass Barry in his speech to the school.
- **Antagonist:** Barry Bagsley
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Popularity Contest. Though Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* has, since its publication, gone from extremely unpopular to a famous "Great American Novel" (and its opening line, "Call me Ishmael," has become one of the best-known lines in literature), the name Ishmael hasn't enjoyed quite the same success. A version of the name (Ismael) is somewhat popular in Spanish-speaking countries, but in the United States, fewer than 1,000 babies are named Ishmael every year.

Rugby vs. Football. In the original Australian edition of *Don't Call Me Ishmael*, the sporting event against Churchill Boys

Grammar is a rugby match. The sport was changed to American football in the U.S. edition of the novel.



PLOT SUMMARY

Fourteen-year-old Ishmael Leseur introduces himself and explains that he suffers from an incurable affliction: Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome. The syndrome come from his name, and his name is the syndrome—it causes him to embarrass himself and other people to torment him. Ishmael's Dad loves telling the story of how Ishmael got his name: Mom was pregnant and very overdue, and when she said she felt like a whale, Dad dressed up as Ahab from **Moby-Dick** and said he was seeking the white whale. Hours later, Ishmael was born and named after **Moby-Dick's** narrator, Ishmael (and the novel's first line, "Call Me Ishmael.")

Ishmael only began suffering from Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome last year, when he started secondary school at St. Daniel's. When his teacher called his name, a boy in the class, Barry Bagsley, insisted Ishmael was a "wussy-crap name" and has made Ishmael's life miserable since.

On Ishmael's first school day of Year Nine, Barry taunts him as usual, calling Ishmael things like "Fish-whale Le-sewer." But in English class, their new teacher, Miss Tarango, gets frustrated with Barry's rude antics and demonstrates "the power of language." She invites him to sit in her chair—and if he's still there by the time she circles the chair three times, he can have the rest of the week off. The bell rings before she finishes her third circle, and she reminds Barry she never said *when* she'd finish the circle. Humiliated, Barry admits defeat. The rest of first term passes in a blur, with Barry targeting Ishmael daily. Ishmael only stands up to Barry once, when Ishmael sees Barry and his cronies, Doug and Danny, taunting a little boy named Marty.

On the first day of second term, Miss Tarango introduces a new student, James Scobie, who has a facial tic that makes Barry target him right away. Ishmael knows things will get worse for him when Miss Tarango assigns him to be Scobie's buddy. But when Barry taunts Scobie, Scobie stands his ground. Ishmael and his classmates are shocked—when Barry picks on someone, they're supposed to just take it. But Scobie insists that he can't feel fear because it disappeared when he had a brain tumor removed. For instance, he used to have a bug phobia and now he doesn't. Barry isn't convinced.

Several weeks later, Barry and his cronies test Scobie's assertion that he can't feel fear. They fill Scobie's homeroom desk with insects and spiders; when Scobie opens his desk, the creatures fill the room. Scobie, though, isn't afraid at all. Barry, Doug, and Danny get in trouble, and Scobie becomes a hero among the student body.

Several weeks later, at the assembly just before St. Daniels's big

football game against Churchill Grammar, Scobie announces that he's starting a debating club. He also reads a rousing poem he wrote, encouraging the St. Daniel's team to bravely take on Churchill. The coach loves the poem so much that he invites Scobie to come to the game. Ishmael tags along. During halftime, he watches Scobie recite the poem again—and against all odds, St. Daniel's wins the game.

At school the next day, Scobie tells Ishmael that he's signing Ishmael up for debating. Ishmael reluctantly agrees only after Scobie assures him that he won't have to do any public speaking. Three other boys come to the first meeting: Ignatius Prindabel (whose mom wants him to develop better social skills), Orazio "Razza" Zorzotto (who wants to be a politician or a stand-up comedian), and Bill Kingsley (who comes looking for the chess club but agrees to stay for debating).

Scobie, Ishmael, and Razza attend a debating workshop, where Ishmael notices Kelly Faulkner and develops a crush on her. For the first few weeks, the debating club meetings go poorly. But with Scobie's help, the team wins their first debate—and their second and third debates too. This qualifies them for the semifinals. A few minutes before the fourth debate, Scobie calls Ishmael and tells him neither Bill nor Ignatius can make it, so Ishmael has to fill in for them.

The debate goes poorly from the start: Kelly is on the opposing team, so Ishmael can barely organize his thoughts. To make matters worse, Razza writes crude things about Ishmael's crush on Kelly on index cards. Ishmael gets up to speak, but he finds he doesn't have any of the right cards. There's also something in his pants—and when it falls out, it turns out to be a clothespin that Ishmael's sister, Prue, decorated to look like Ringo Starr. Ishmael faints. When the debating team debriefs the next day, Ishmael is humiliated to learn that he accidentally groped Kelly Faulkner's breast on the way down.

Soon after this, Scobie writes Ishmael a letter, explaining that a recent brain scan found a "shadow" and he needs to have more tests to make sure the tumor isn't coming back. He won't be able to compete in the semifinals. The debating team decides to compete without Scobie—if Ishmael agrees to speak. They do surprisingly well, as their topic is to prove that sci-fi and fantasy are relevant to real life. This happens to be Bill's area of expertise, so the team only loses by one point. It feels like a win.

The next week, Miss Tarango announces that Scobie isn't coming back to school. The principal, Brother Jerome, gives the debating team special certificates for getting to the semifinals. Barry, meanwhile, begins to bully Bill for his weight. Things get worse when Ishmael tells Barry to stop, as this causes Barry to continue taunting Bill and then look at Ishmael as though daring Ishmael to stop him.

Razza convinces Ishmael to go with him to the debating finals in support of the team that beat them in the semifinals. There, Kelly approaches Ishmael. He awkwardly apologizes for

groping her, but Kelly says she really just wants to thank Ishmael for saving her brother, Marty, from Barry. They then discuss Ishmael's name. Ishmael says he hates it, since he's named after the narrator of [Moby-Dick](#). Kelly is shocked to learn that Ishmael hasn't read the book. So that night, Ishmael asks Dad for a copy and starts reading.

As Ishmael reads, he discovers he's nothing like the Ishmael in the novel (Ishmael in [Moby-Dick](#) doesn't ever do anything embarrassing), but he is a lot like the crazy captain Ahab. Ahab is out for revenge against the white whale who ate his leg—and Ishmael feels like he wants revenge against Barry in much the same way. Barry continues to terrorize Bill, and although Bill looks sadder and sadder every day, he refuses to tell teachers what's happening.

Two weeks before school gets out, the vice principal, Mr. Barker, tells the debating team they'll be reading prayers at the final school event. Ishmael stewes about having to speak—until the day of final presentations in Mr. Barker's class. Bill is the only boy who took the presentation seriously, but as he starts his PowerPoint, it becomes clear that Barry tampered with it: in addition to Bill's slides, there are also slides of hippos and weight loss ads. Mr. Barker accuses Bill of making a joke and slacking off, and he gives Bill a D. Ishmael is enraged and later tells Razza he wants to do something, but he doesn't know what. When Barry taunts Ishmael and Razza, he says that Ishmael "doesn't have a prayer" of getting him to stop tormenting Bill.

Ishmael spends several days upset—but finally, after a dream, he realizes how he can get back at Barry. On the night of the final school event, Ishmael finds Barry and says that he *does* "have a prayer." He puts a piece of paper in Barry's hand and runs away. Ishmael's plan is to read what he wrote on the paper he gave Barry—a prayer that Barry will stop bullying people—instead of the prayer Brother Jerome helped him write. But before Ishmael's speech, he sees Barry in the audience. To Ishmael's surprise, Barry is with his parents, and they look nice and normal. Worst of all, Barry wears a defeated look that Ishmael knows well, since Barry makes Ishmael look like that all the time. Ishmael decides to read his original prayer—he doesn't want hurt anyone, even Barry.

After the speeches, Ishmael and the debating team say goodbye to Miss Tarango. To cheer Bill up, Razza organizes a sci-fi movie marathon for the weekend. Mr. Barker finds Ishmael and shares that Scobie will be returning to school next year. And then, Ignatius runs back and gives Ishmael a letter. The letter is from Kelly Faulkner, inviting Ishmael and Razza to a party in February. It includes her phone number and tells Ishmael to call her. Ishmael has never been happier. As he rolls in the grass outside the school, he feels like he's on the ocean—kind of like Ishmael at the end of [Moby-Dick](#).



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ishmael Leseur – The protagonist of the novel, Ishmael is a 14-year-old Year Nine student at St. Daniel's Boys School. Ishmael lived a happy, idyllic life until a year before the novel begins, when he started at St. Daniel's. At that point, a bully named Barry Bagsley began bullying Ishmael for having a "wussy-crap name." So now, Ishmael believes that he suffers from what he calls Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome, which causes him to be unpopular and regularly embarrass himself. He blames his parents for naming Ishmael, but he believes the real culprit is Herman Melville, the author of [Moby-Dick](#) (the narrator of [Moby-Dick](#) is Ishmael's namesake). At school, Ishmael goes out of his way to hide from Barry, occasionally standing up for other kids but generally keeping quiet. Things begin to change at the start of second term, when James Scobie joins the Year Nine class. Scobie quickly puts Barry in his place, which earns him Ishmael's loyalty and respect. Scobie also starts a debating team and encourages Ishmael to join. This is difficult for Ishmael, as he's terrified of public speaking, so Scobie promises that Ishmael will only ever have to help write the speeches. Ishmael fills in once during a competition—but he faints and accidentally gropes his crush, Kelly Faulkner, on the way down. When Scobie has to leave school for medical reasons, things again get worse. Ishmael finds that Barry's bullying gets harder to bear because Barry begins targeting Bill Kingsley, a large boy on the debating team. Ishmael can't stand to see his friend targeted so ruthlessly. Around this time, Ishmael also decides to read [Moby-Dick](#) and figure out who his namesake actually is. With what Ishmael learns from [Moby-Dick](#) and from debating, he figures out a way to stop Barry by humiliating him at the last all-school event. Ultimately, though, Ishmael chooses not to humiliate Barry, as he doesn't want to become a bully himself. The novel ends with Ishmael secure in his identity and his friendships, and with him looking forward to seeing Kelly again, as she invites him to a party.

James Scobie – Scobie is a boy who joins Ishmael's Year Nine class at the beginning of second term. Ishmael immediately identifies him as someone who will be Barry's favorite bullying target: Scobie wears his hair parted and perfectly combed, pulls his shorts up as high as they'll go, and turns his socks down to match perfectly. But what really marks him as a target is the fact that he has a facial tic, where his mouth regularly twists to one side and then the other while his nose wiggles and his eyes widen. Despite his extremely unimposing appearance, Scobie turns out to be a fair opponent for Barry almost immediately. Scobie is smart and sharp-witted, so he's easily able to insult Barry. But for Ishmael, the most impressive thing about Scobie is his insistence that he can't feel fear. Scobie had a brain tumor removed about a year before the novel begins, and he believes that the operation damaged the part of his brain that makes

him feel fear. This, Scobie explains to Barry, is why he isn't afraid of Barry and never will be. This quality earns Scobie Ishmael's respect instantly, and the two become friends. Scobie consistently impresses Ishmael, as when Scobie has the confidence to start debating teams at St. Daniel's and when Scobie writes and recites a stirring poem urging the St. Daniel's football team to fight hard in the game against Churchill Grammar. Scobie is able to convince Ishmael to join the debating team despite Ishmael's crushing fear of public speaking, and against all odds, Scobie whips the team into shape such that they win their first three debates. Ishmael is distraught when Scobie is pulled out of school for months to undergo testing; a recent brain scan found a "shadow," and it's possible the tumor has come back. But Ishmael continues to think often of Scobie and use him as inspiration to overcome his own fears. Ultimately, further testing finds nothing, and Scobie plans to return to school the following year.

Bill Kingsley – Bill is one of Ishmael's classmates who also joins the debating team. Bill is an easygoing guy who exists mostly in his own world: he loves sci-fi and fantasy, so he seldom pays attention in class in favor of doodling spaceships. Because of this, he has a reputation for being checked out and disinterested when it comes to school. He only ends up joining the debating team because he comes to the first meeting expecting it to be a chess club meeting, but he agrees to stay anyway. Razza teases Bill incessantly about debating, as Bill is notoriously bad at it. Most of the time he struggles to understand what the topics are about or to rebut others' arguments. He believes that everyone is entitled to their own opinion and is more than willing to concede when others make good points. Bill suddenly comes to life in the semifinals when the team has to prove that sci-fi and fantasy films are relevant to real life. He leads the team to victory with an impassioned speech and comes up with most of the team's arguments, thanks to the fact that he's well-versed in the genre. After this, Ishmael and the other debating team members develop respect for Bill, and Bill starts to take school more seriously. But things take a turn for the worse when Barry decides to target and bully Bill. Bill is very large, so Barry starts by stealing Bill's debating certificate and pasting a picture of Jabba the Hutt on it. Barry also sabotages a PowerPoint presentation that Bill spent a lot of time putting together by inserting slides with pictures of hippos and weight loss ads. This convinces Ishmael that it's worth it to stand up to Barry, as he sees how defeated and upset Bill is every day because of Barry's bullying. Though Ishmael chooses not to humiliate Barry the way Barry has humiliated Bill, the novel offers hope that Bill will be happier and more supported going forward, as Razza rallies to plan a sci-fi movie marathon the week after school gets out for Christmas holidays.

Orazio "Razza" Zorzotto – Razza is the Year Nine class clown and, according to Ishmael, an obvious choice for the debating

team. He wants to be either a politician or a standup comedian when he grows up, so it makes sense to Ishmael that Razza would join for the speaking practice. It soon becomes obvious, though, that Razza joined debating because of the opportunities it would give him to meet girls from other schools. Razza seldom, if ever, takes anything seriously. He constantly makes jokes and puns that, while funny, annoy Scobie and Ishmael in particular. Razza is also not the best debater, as he tends to rely on his perceived charm with mixed results. But as Ishmael gets to know Razza better, he also comes to realize that Razza is a loyal friend to both him and Bill Kingsley. Razza is an important cheerleader for Ishmael as Ishmael grapples with his crush on Kelly, though Razza's support isn't always useful—his teasing notes about Ishmael's crush are part of what causes Ishmael to faint during a debate. While Razza insists that Barry's bullying (of which he's also been a victim) shouldn't bother anyone since Barry is a "wanker," he also agrees with Ishmael that it's worth any possible pain or humiliation to defend Bill. But Razza never actually takes on Barry to defend Bill—instead, Ishmael realizes that Razza's real power is in his friendship and his loyalty. Despite not liking "space stuff," when Razza hears that Bill is planning to see the third installment of a sci-fi trilogy the week after school lets out, Razza insists not just on accompanying Bill to the theater, but on planning a marathon to watch the first two movies in the series. He makes Bill laugh and feel supported, and Ishmael greatly admires Razza's kindness.

Ignatius Prindabel – Ignatius is the first Year Nine boy to join Scobie's debating team. Ishmael describes him as being like an old man in a teenager's body. He also insists that Ignatius is an interesting choice for debating, as Ignatius loves facts and figures and whips them out at odd times—but Ignatius also refuses to think creatively. Ignatius explains that he's joining the debating team because, according to his mother, he needs to improve his social skills. Though Ignatius continues to struggle with creative thinking, is never a compelling speaker, and is arguably the least engaged team member, his wide knowledge base and understanding of his teammates' strengths and weaknesses makes him an invaluable member of the team. However, Ignatius never becomes close friends with the other debating boys.

Barry Bagsley – The antagonist of the novel, Barry is the powerful bully in Year Nine at St. Daniel's Boys School. Barry is tall, sporty, and blond, and he uses a combination of insults and physical intimidation to frighten most boys in the school. Students realized early on that their choices in dealing with Barry were to either join him—which his cronies, Doug and Danny, chose—or to avoid him, which Ishmael and everyone else went with. Many of Barry's insults are based around making fun of people's names (so he calls Ishmael things like Fish-whale Le-sewer), calling boys girls, or insinuating that his classmates are babies. Through this, he creates an environment

where everyone is afraid to say anything for fear of what Barry is going to say back. But Barry meets his match when James Scobie arrives at St. Daniel's and not only flaunts his intelligence, but shows that Barry can't frighten him into being quiet. When Barry's attempt to frighten Scobie by filling his desk with bugs and spiders fails, Ishmael thinks of Barry as being like the T-rex in *Jurassic Park*: behind an electric fence and harmless for the moment, but guaranteed to eventually escape. And Barry does eventually return to his full power when Scobie has to leave school for medical reasons. But this time, rather than target Ishmael, Barry targets Bill Kingsley for his weight. He torments Ishmael, too, by making it clear that Ishmael can't stop him from tormenting Bill. Finally, though, Ishmael uses the "power of language" to best Barry, letting him know that he plans to read a prayer at an all-school event, praying that Barry will stop bullying people. Seeing how defeated Barry looks, though, Ishmael decides not to go through with it. Nevertheless, this successfully (if temporarily) cuts into Barry's power, offering hope that Barry won't be quite as much of a menace when students return for the next school year.

Miss Tarango – Miss Tarango is a brand-new English teacher at St. Daniel's Boys School. At first, Ishmael is certain she won't last a term or a week, because Miss Tarango is young and beautiful and seems very nice. But she soon shows that she's not afraid of any of her students, especially Barry Bagsley, and has her class under control in her first period with them. She does this by demonstrating the "power of language," challenging Barry to sit in her chair until she circles him three times—but she doesn't specify *when* she'll finish her third circle, and refuses to do so before class breaks for lunch. This embarrasses Barry and immediately makes Miss Tarango Ishmael's favorite and teacher. Later, Miss Tarango channels her belief in the power of language into helping Scobie start debating teams. Ishmael admires Miss Tarango greatly and is excited to come back to school the following year in part because of her.

Mr. Barker – Mr. Barker is the vice principal at St. Daniel's. He also teaches Ishmael's Study of Society class. Mr. Barker is an imposing figure; Ishmael notes that one simply doesn't disobey Mr. Barker, as Mr. Barker will absolutely punish any students who disobey him. He's also a master of sarcasm. Though Ishmael trusts and respects Mr. Barker, Mr. Barker is occasionally cruel, especially to Bill Kingsley. When the PowerPoint for Bill's final speech in Mr. Barker's class turns out to have been tampered with (presumably by Barry), Mr. Barker instead accuses Bill of not taking the assignment seriously and wasting his time. And though Ishmael encourages Bill at several points to tell Mr. Barker about Barry's bullying, Bill refuses—and for that matter, Ishmael never tells Mr. Barker about the bullying he experiences, either. So while Mr. Barker purports to not tolerate bullying and urges victims to come to him, the novel shows that his methods are actually extremely

ineffective.

Kelly Faulkner – Kelly is Ishmael's love interest. She attends Lourdes School for Girls and is on her school's debate team. Ishmael is immediately taken with her when he notices her icy blue eyes and her beautiful smile. But things go downhill for Ishmael when, the first time Ishmael has to debate in competition against Kelly's team, he faints—and accidentally gropes Kelly's breast as he falls. After this, Ishmael figures he has no chance with Kelly. But months later, Kelly finds Ishmael and thanks him for defending her brother, Marty, against Barry and Barry's cronies. She also encourages Ishmael to read **Moby-Dick** to figure out what the character Ishmael in the novel is like. Ishmael remains convinced that Kelly is out of his league until the end of the school year, when Ignatius passes Ishmael a note from Kelly inviting him and Razza to a party at the end of the Christmas holidays.

Dad – Ishmael and Prue's dad is a supportive parent, though Ishmael acknowledges his dad has his faults. Dad believes the story of how Ishmael got his name is something he needs to share with everyone, no matter how the listener feels about hearing it. Dad also thinks he's very funny, so he regularly tells jokes that make Ishmael and others roll their eyes. Mom and Dad met in an American Literature class at university, in which they studied the novel **Moby-Dick**. This is why they decided to name Ishmael after the novel's narrator: Dad loves **Moby-Dick** and all its film adaptations.

Mom – Ishmael and Prue's mom is, like Ishmael's dad, a supportive parent. She's on the city council. Ishmael's mom only figures prominently in Ishmael's retelling of how he got his name (Dad made **Moby-Dick** jokes when Mom was overdue in her pregnancy with Ishmael, and laughing caused her to go into labor).

Prue Leseur – Prue is Ishmael's little sister and Mom and Dad's daughter. Ishmael describes her as a genius, or almost a genius, and many consider her to be "adorable." For the most part, Ishmael has made peace with the fact that he's never going to be able to outshine his sister. But she does occasionally cause him problems, as when her extensive project of turning pegs (clothespins) into influential historical figures humiliates Ishmael at a debate. (The peg person version of Ringo Starr accidentally gets stuck in Ishmael's pants and falls out his pant leg while he's speaking).

The Year Ten Kid/Jeremy Gainsborough – The "Year Ten kid," Jeremy, is unwillingly roped into Barry's scheme to frighten Scobie by filling his desk with insects and spiders. Jeremy won an award several years ago for an exhibit on insects, so he supplies Barry and his crew with the necessary bugs. He gets in trouble too when Mr. Barker finds the culprits, though Scobie doesn't hold it against him. Indeed, after Jeremy apologizes to Scobie for his involvement, Scobie presents Jeremy with a new, massive stick insect.

Mrs. Bagsley – Barry Bagsley’s mom takes Ishmael totally by surprise when he sees her at the end of school event: she’s beautiful, and she looks kind and engaged with her son’s life. In all ways, she’s nothing like Ishmael expected her to be (cruel, disaffected, or even nonexistent). Seeing her and how normal and nice she looks is part of the reason Ishmael chooses not to humiliate Barry during his prayer reading.

Peter Chung – Peter Chung is a player on the St. Daniel’s football team. He’s a poor player, and it sometimes seems like he’s not sure how exactly football works—but he is an extremely fast runner. So, when the team gets him the ball during the final game against Churchill Grammar, Peter manages to evade Frankie Crow and score a touchdown, winning the game for St. Daniel’s.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Danny Wallace – Danny is one of Barry Bagsley’s cronies; he helps Barry bully Ishmael and other kids at school.

Doug Savage – Doug is one of Barry Bagsley’s cronies. He helps Barry bully other kids and doesn’t take school seriously.

Marty/The Boy – Marty is a little boy from Moorfield Primary whom Ishmael rescues from Barry, Danny, and Doug’s bullying. Later, Ishmael discovers that Marty is Kelly Faulkner’s little brother.

Mr. Hardcastle – Mr. Hardcastle (or Coach Hardcastle) is the football coach at St. Daniel’s. He’s obsessed with winning and has a poor grasp of what’s appropriate, or politically correct, to say.

Frankie Crow – Frankie Crow is the towering star player on the Churchill Grammar Boys School football team.

Brother Jerome – Brother Jerome is the principal at St. Daniel’s.

making it his mission to torture and bully Ishmael whenever possible. So Ishmael blames his “wussy-crap name” for his awkwardness, weakness, and loneliness. But things begin to change when a new boy, James Scobie, joins Ishmael’s Year Nine class. Scobie isn’t afraid to stand up to Barry—and he also ropes Ishmael and three other boys into joining a new debating team. As Ishmael learns to master his fear of public speaking while also making friends, developing a crush on a girl from another school, and eventually reading [Moby-Dick](#), Ishmael realizes that his name—and the identity he thought it gave him—isn’t set in stone. Rather, Ishmael discovers that his identity is something he can shape, no matter what his name might be.

When readers first meet Ishmael, he insists he’s helpless to shape his identity—he feels as though other people have all the power to tell him who, and what, he is. Ishmael first blames his parents for saddling him with such a distinctive (and, in his opinion, embarrassing) name. Ishmael believes his parents have set him up for a life of people meeting him and then saying his name is “interesting”—or, if they’re familiar with [Moby-Dick](#), spouting off the novel’s first line, “Call me Ishmael.” Because of this, Ishmael feels cursed with a name that, in his opinion, gives others license to decide who he is: a kid who’s named after a hugely important figure in American literature, not a person in his own right. But those problems pale in comparison when Ishmael starts secondary school and bully Barry Bagsley insists that Ishmael is a “wussy-crap name.” The way Ishmael frames this episode shows that he takes Barry’s assessment as fact—rather than wonder if Barry is actually right about this, Ishmael instead asks whether his parents or Herman Melville knew that Ishmael is a “wussy-crap name.” And because Ishmael takes Barry’s opinion as fact, he immediately starts to think of himself as a “wuss” and, in the interest of avoiding Barry’s taunts, goes out of his way to make himself invisible. Essentially, because of the way Barry makes Ishmael feel ashamed and self-conscious about his name, Ishmael decides that he’s destined to be invisible and uncool.

Ishmael begins to feel more in control of his identity as he experiences success in debating and makes friends, suggesting that his perceived powerlessness was merely a reflection of his loneliness. When James Scobie joins Ishmael’s Year Nine class, he immediately puts Barry in his place. And as Barry fades into the background, Ishmael suddenly has the breathing room to experiment with who he is and who, or what, he wants to be. Because Ishmael trusts Scobie so fully, he joins the debating club despite his fear of public speaking—and even agrees, twice, to stand up and speak during debating competitions. And despite Ishmael’s poor performances (he faints the first time and stumbles through his speech the second), his friends’ support allows him to see that he’s not actually as inept as he thought he was. The friends that Ishmael makes during debating also help him decide to explore his identity, rather



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.



IDENTITY AND COMING OF AGE

Don’t Call Me Ishmael begins with 14-year-old Ishmael Leseur explaining to readers that he hates his name, since he believes it’s the source of all his trouble. He shares a first name with one of the most famous characters in American literature (Ishmael from Herman Melville’s whaling novel [Moby-Dick](#)), and the school bully Barry Bagsley deemed Ishmael a “wussy-crap name” a year ago,

than accept what Barry says is true about it. For instance, Razza encourages Ishmael to believe he has a chance with Kelly—something that Ishmael brushes off as ridiculous, but that eventually seems like a possibility when Kelly gives Ishmael her phone number. And Kelly, for her part, encourages Ishmael to finally read [Moby-Dick](#) to figure out what Herman Melville's Ishmael is like, and how Ishmael might relate to his namesake. Put another way, the friends Ishmael makes give him the support and encouragement he needs to start looking at himself in a new light.

What finally spurs Ishmael to realize that he controls his own identity is realizing that while his name is a part of him, it doesn't define who he is. Ishmael has an epiphany when, in the course of reading [Moby-Dick](#), he discovers that Melville's Ishmael is nothing like him. Ishmael in the novel doesn't faint when he sees whales and effectively performs his duties on the whaling ship without messing up. And for Ishmael, this is somewhat freeing. Realizing he's nothing like the fictional Ishmael opens him up to realizing that he actually identifies far more with a different character in [Moby-Dick](#): Captain Ahab, the mad captain who desperately wants to get revenge on the whale Moby Dick, which bit off one of Ahab's legs. As Ishmael makes this discovery, he's confronted by a choice: what kind of a person does he want to be? Initially, Ishmael decides to lean into his identification with Ahab and seek revenge on Barry for making him, as well as Ishmael's friend Bill Kingsley, miserable. But ultimately, Ishmael decides that he wants to take the high road and not bully others, no matter how tempting that might be. And by the end of the novel, after Ishmael has decided not to humiliate Barry at an end of year school event, Ishmael is far more secure in who he is, in his friendships, and in his future.

Through Ishmael's journey of discovering who he wants to be and who he is, the novel presents identity as something that's in no way set in stone. One quality (such as Ishmael's name or Bill's love of sci-fi) doesn't define a person's whole identity. Rather, as Ishmael discovers, forming one's identity is a process of discovery and of making decisions about who one wants to be.



BULLYING AND COURAGE

When readers first meet 14-year-old Ishmael, his only goal at school is to be invisible. This is because he's the favorite target of the school bully, Barry Bagsley. And the only way to deal with Barry's bullying, Ishmael reasons, is to keep his head down and stay out of Barry's way as much as possible. But as Year Nine progresses and Ishmael starts to make friends at school, he starts to rethink his approach to Barry's bullying crusade—and he realizes that when Barry targets Ishmael's friends and other kids with less power, it's worth the possible pain and humiliation to stand up to Barry. *Don't Call Me Ishmael* presents bullying as an issue that's difficult to fix because the true extent of bullying is often

invisible to authority figures, which leaves it up to victims and bystanders to defend themselves. The novel also suggests that while it may be impossible to totally stamp out bullying, simply standing up to protect one's friends, and exposing bullies as the fallible humans they are, are good first steps in depriving bullies of some of their power.

At first, Ishmael believes bullying is just an unpleasant fact of life that can't be stopped. Ishmael explains that upon starting secondary school at St. Daniel's, all students realized they had only two options: to avoid Barry Bagsley's bullying by joining Barry's crew of bullies, or to avoid Barry altogether. This frames bullying as something inevitable—the only choices kids have are to try to evade it or to join in. This also suggests that the students themselves believe they are incapable of standing up for themselves or for others. Ishmael regularly expresses his belief that he can't do anything about bullying when, at various points, he mentions Barry daring Ishmael to force him to stop bullying others—and Ishmael notes to readers that they both know he can't do anything.

The novel shows that this situation persists, in part, because adults in charge of protecting students are ill-equipped to either find out about, or put a stop to, bullying when it happens. Though the vice principal, Mr. Barker, eventually states the school's bullying policy outright (that the administration won't tolerate bullying of any sort and wants to hear about it when it happens), Ishmael's explanation of his and his classmates' options to avoid bullying doesn't involve confiding in adults. This gives the impression that while the bullying policy might be a nice idea, it's not one that the kids can believe in or trust. This is evident when Barry begins a concerted effort to bully Bill Kingsley, and Bill refuses to go to Mr. Barker. Both Bill and Ishmael understand that looping in an adult will make things worse for Bill, as being reprimanded will only make Barry more intent on making Bill's life miserable. Ishmael's teachers' ineffectiveness at stopping bullying also stems from the fact that a lot of the bullying Ishmael witnesses or experiences takes place where teachers can't see it. Barry taunts Ishmael during passing periods and lunch, when there aren't as many adults around, and he waits for the teacher to leave the room before starting to torment Scobie on Scobie's first day. Especially since most teachers (Miss Tarango seems to be a notable exception) also ignore it when Barry calls Ishmael "Le Sewer" audibly in class, this gives the impression that teachers don't understand the full extent of how, and where, Barry is tormenting his classmates. Given the bullying policy, after all, teachers should be reprimanding Barry for these taunts.

While the novel ends with the implication that Barry will continue to torment Ishmael and his friends into the next school year, it also suggests two methods for dealing with bullies: refusing to play their power games, and seeing them as fallible humans like anyone else. James Scobie demonstrates the first option on his first day at St. Daniel's. When Barry

begins to throw paper at Scobie and threaten to beat Scobie up, Scobie doesn't rise to the bait or give in to Barry's power. Instead, he insists he's not afraid of Barry and, indeed, that he can't feel fear at all. In his narration, Ishmael notes that this is not what's supposed to happen when Barry bullies someone—victims are supposed to take the abuse and stand down. It's revelatory to see that at least pretending to not be afraid and refusing to give in can actually make a dent in Barry's hold on the school. After a failed attempt to frighten Scobie, Barry's reputation tanks, and he stops bullying people for a while. Then, toward the end of the novel, Ishmael starts to see Barry as human when he finally comes up with his plan to humiliate Barry in front of the entire student body, students' parents, and the teachers. He plans to read a prayer that Barry will stop bullying people, and before taking the stage, he gives Barry a copy of the prayer and lets on what he's going to do. In this situation, Ishmael finds himself with all the power. He realizes that he can ruin Barry's life in an instant—and Barry knows this too, as he furiously mouths at Ishmael to not do it. But when Ishmael sees Barry looking defeated and humiliated in the audience (and sees that Barry has parents who look perfectly nice), Ishmael can't bring himself to read his prayer. Barry, Ishmael realizes, is human too—and Ishmael doesn't want to become a bully himself, even if doing so might save the rest of the student body from Barry. But simply having this power over Barry for a few minutes gives Ishmael the confidence to realize that he can stand up to Barry in the coming months and years at school, and that he doesn't have to stoop to Barry's level to make a dent in Barry's power. Essentially, the novel encourages readers to see bullies as people, albeit ones who can do a lot of damage to their victims—and because they're people, it's possible to call their bluffs, just like one could with anyone else.



FRIENDSHIP

Don't Call Me Ishmael is, in many ways, a story of unlikely friendships. Ishmael begins the novel without any friends at school. But midway through the year, when James Scobie—who has a facial tic that makes him an instant target for bully Barry Bagsley—starts at St. Daniel's Boys School, he and Ishmael quickly become friends. And their circle expands when Scobie starts a debating team which attracts several other loners in the Year Nine class: sci-fi obsessed Bill Kingsley, socially awkward Ignatius Prindabel, and class clown Orazio "Razza" Zorzotto. The novel closely links Ishmael's ability to start coming of age in Year Nine to his new friendships. His friends help him overcome his fears of public speaking, in addition to providing him with much-needed support as Ishmael grapples with various obstacles. *Don't Call Me Ishmael* positions friendship as something capable of helping a person expand their worldview and, perhaps more importantly, showing a person the importance of protecting

and standing up for others.

Don't Call Me Ishmael presents friendless characters—including Ishmael—as one-dimensional, without any room to grow or develop. As Ishmael narrates his first term of Year Nine (Scobie doesn't arrive until second term), he describes himself as someone who's guaranteed to do embarrassing things, and who's guaranteed to suffer bullying from Barry Bagsley. There's no indication that Ishmael believes anything will change in his life, even as he grows older and has new experiences. Instead, Ishmael feels stagnant and stuck in his role as the "village idiot." Ishmael also describes his classmates, including several he ends up befriending, in similar terms. For instance, he describes Bill Kingsley as being in his own world and obsessed with sci-fi and fantasy, without any acknowledgement that there's certainly more to Bill than his love of *Lord of the Rings*. And Ishmael also regularly includes asides from Razza, thereby presenting Razza as someone who's good at witty comebacks—but nothing more than that. So Ishmael presents himself and his future friends as one-dimensional caricatures, not fully formed people.

On the other hand, the novel shows how friendship can help a person expand their worldview by making people who once seemed one-dimensional into complex human beings, while also helping people better understand themselves. After befriending Scobie, Bill, Ignatius, and Razza, Ishmael still has embarrassing moments (such as when he faints during a debate and accidentally gropes his crush's breast on the way down). But he does start to see himself as capable and not just destined to be an embarrassment. And this is all because Ishmael gets to know the other boys on the debating team and starts to trust in their support as he figures out who he is. Ishmael also starts to rethink his preconceptions about his new friends. While Ishmael initially thought of James Scobie as an easy target for Barry, Ishmael comes to trust Scobie unconditionally when Scobie stands up to Barry and effectively takes away all of Barry's power. Bill, though he remains extremely interested in sci-fi and fantasy, starts to emerge as a kind, reliable person in Ishmael's eyes—a far cry from the disaffected boy Ishmael initially thought Bill was. And particularly after Scobie leaves school for medical reasons, Razza becomes one of Ishmael's best friends and supporters, and a levelheaded voice of reason when it comes to Barry's bullying. No one, the novel suggests, is entirely who they seem from the outside—and befriending someone is a good way to start to see who they really are, as well as to figure out one's own identity.

Most importantly, the novel shows that friendships can motivate people to stand up for one another in situations where they never would've considered doing so before. Prior to becoming friends with the debating team, Ishmael doesn't see the point in standing up to Barry in most situations. Barry's endless taunts are grating, but Ishmael finds it easier to try to make himself invisible than to tell Barry to stop. But this all

changes when Barry begins to target Bill for his weight and launches a bullying campaign that's even crueler than what he's done in the past. Seeing how upset and withdrawn Bill gets every time he finds a picture of a hippo or a weight loss ad taped in his desk or locker, Ishmael knows he can't stay silent anymore. *He* may be able to withstand Barry's bullying, but Ishmael recognizes that Bill is struggling to stay strong in the face of such cruelty. Spurred to action by his loyalty to Bill, Ishmael starts to challenge Barry as opportunities arise. At first, this doesn't do much except make Ishmael feel even worse—he recognizes that simply telling Barry to stop won't make Barry stop, or even do anything meaningful for Bill. But Ishmael's anger and loyalty leads him to come up with a plan to humiliate Barry in front of the school—and, Ishmael believes, leave his victims alone for good. The novel directly links Ishmael's ability to come up with such a plan to his friendship with Bill, as Ishmael never saw the point in standing up to Barry until he had Bill to protect.

Ultimately, Ishmael decides not to go through with humiliating Barry—he can't stand the prospect of becoming a bully himself. But despite this, the novel still maintains that robust, loyal friendships are some of the best antidotes to bullying. Immediately following Ishmael's choice to not humiliate Barry, Razza, in an attempt to cheer Bill up, invites himself along to a sci-fi movie and also plans a movie marathon for himself, Bill, and Ishmael. This is something that not only makes Bill feel supported and valued in the moment—it also shows that going forward, Bill will have friends who will be there for him and lessen the impact of Barry's bullying. It's not always necessary, the novel suggests, for friends to actually battle adversaries for one another—sometimes, it can be enough to offer support and make one's friends feel safe, understood, and appreciated.



THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

On Ishmael's first day of Year Nine, his English teacher, Miss Tarango, demonstrates for the class the "power of language." Spurred to action by bully

Barry Bagsley's taunts and disrespect, Miss Tarango invites Barry to sit in her chair while she walks around him three times. If he manages to stay in the chair until she completes her third circle, she promises he can have the rest of the week off. Miss Tarango, of course, refuses to finish the third circle before the bell rings, and Barry is forced to admit defeat—after all, her language was powerfully vague: she never said *when* she would complete the third circle. With this demonstration, Miss Tarango positions language's power as one of the novel's chief concerns. This is apparent as Ishmael joins a debating team and conquers his fear of public speaking—and as Barry torments Ishmael and Ishmael's friends with rude nicknames and insults, rather than physical violence. *Don't Call Me Ishmael* presents language as a power that's available to anyone who can use their voice to speak up and communicate with others. But the

trick, the novel shows, isn't just learning to speak up—the true power of language comes in knowing how and when to speak up, and when to stay silent.

The novel links Ishmael's perceived helplessness in the beginning of the novel to his unwillingness to use his voice to advocate for himself. Ishmael is, on some level, aware of the power of language from the very beginning of the novel. Indeed, he explains how his dad regularly regales people with the tale of how Ishmael got his name, a story that Ishmael frames as a sort of punishment for anyone who's forced to listen to it (including Ishmael himself). And Ishmael also sees how bad Barry can make him feel, simply by regularly butchering Ishmael's name. But Ishmael insists that it's futile to try to stop either Dad or Barry from forcing their victims to listen to whatever it is they have to say. Ishmael describes Dad in storytelling mode as "a runaway semitrailer," and he sarcastically implies that while Barry can use language for his own cruel aims, he's impervious if anyone tries to speak to him and get him to stop. But, importantly, Ishmael suggests that it's impossible to even try—implying, perhaps, that he *hasn't* tried to use his words to either stop Dad from telling a story that humiliates Ishmael, or to get Barry to stop bullying him or others. Silence, in this situation, is a source of powerlessness.

But after Ishmael joins the debating team and pays more attention in Miss Tarango's class, he starts to see that it's not so frightening to use his voice to advocate for what he wants—and that doing so can yield positive results. After Miss Tarango's demonstration with Barry on the first day of term (which makes Miss Tarango a hero in Ishmael's mind), Ishmael's lessons in the power of language mostly come from James Scobie. When Barry tries to torment Scobie on Scobie's first day of school, Scobie does "what you're not supposed to do" and engages with Barry. At first, Ishmael describes the boys' exchange as a shootout from a Western film, the implication being that Barry will inevitably shoot Scobie down and emerge victorious. But as the exchange proceeds, Ishmael changes his perspective and decides that what's going on is actually like a boxing match. And while Barry's "punches" (meaning his words) might be wild and strong, Scobie's words are quick and do just as much, if not more, damage. Scobie's rousing poem supporting the St. Daniel's football team also shows Ishmael the power of language—it gets everyone, fans and players alike, revved up and helps the St. Daniel's team win a match they were sure to lose. Seeing Scobie use language encourages Ishmael to learn to do the same. While his first attempt to speak during a debate leads to Ishmael fainting, his second attempt goes fairly well—and after this, Ishmael finds that he's not so afraid of speaking up anymore. Following his successful debate, Ishmael isn't as afraid of taking on Barry when Barry torments Bill Kingsley, and he also encourages others (like Bill) to use their words, just as Scobie did for him earlier in the novel.

But as Ishmael finds his voice, he also finds that his true power

lies in knowing when to use it—and when to stay silent. Ishmael grows increasingly angry as, without Scobie around to stop him (Scobie has to leave school for medical reasons), Barry targets Bill and bullies him incessantly about his weight. Ishmael's righteous anger and newfound belief in the power of language lead him to formulate a plan to take Barry down: to read a prayer that Barry will stop bullying people in front of the student body, students' parents, and teachers at the final school function of the year. Ishmael is confident that through language, he can stop Barry in his tracks by humiliating him and exposing him as the bully he is. But Ishmael has to confront the true power of his words when he sees how defeated Barry looks in the moments before Ishmael is slated to speak. Ishmael realizes that he's not really using his power to protect Bill—he's actually using his power to stoop to Barry's level and bully Barry, just as Barry has bullied others for years. So, the novel presents Ishmael's choice to read a different prayer that doesn't call Barry out as taking the high road. And it also suggests that sometimes, even the threat of certain words is enough to create change—Barry is, after all, barely able to speak when he confronts Ishmael after the event is over. With this, the novel encourages readers to find their voices and advocate for themselves—but also to use their voices kindly, rather than using language to make others feel bad.



SYMBOLS

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



MOBY-DICK

Ishmael's relationship to the novel *Moby-Dick* represents his transformation from feeling insecure and powerless to confident and in control of his life. When readers first meet Ishmael, he believes that all his problems in life (such as suffering from the fictional Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome, which makes the sufferer do embarrassing things) can be traced back to *Moby-Dick*'s author, Herman Melville. It's Melville's fault, Ishmael reasons, for writing *Moby-Dick*, naming his narrator Ishmael, and putting into the world a novel his parents would eventually study in college—and choose to take as inspiration for their son's name. And his name, Ishmael believes, spurs others to exhibit "disturbing behavior," as when Dad forces people to listen to the story of how Ishmael got his name, or when Barry Bagsley taunts Ishmael for having a "wussy-crap name." At this point, Ishmael does everything he can to hide from his name and from his name's origins. In this way, *Moby-Dick* is initially associated with Ishmael's low self-esteem, and his mindset that outside influences (whether a book or other people) dictate who he is. But as Ishmael gains confidence through the debating club, he

begins to feel less self-conscious about his name. And things really take a turn when Ishmael's crush, Kelly Faulkner, inspires him to actually read *Moby-Dick* and learn what Melville's Ishmael is like. To Ishmael's surprise, he discovers that he's nothing like the fictional Ishmael—and in fact, he's a lot more like Captain Ahab, the mad captain seeking the titular whale, Moby-Dick. Reading *Moby-Dick* thus helps Ishmael realize that his name doesn't define him, and that he alone gets to decide who he is. Learning about his namesake by reading *Moby-Dick*, and having Kelly write "Call me Ishmael" (the first line of *Moby-Dick*) as a way of telling him to call her, give Ishmael newfound confidence, pride, and understanding of himself. *Moby-Dick* therefore comes to represent Ishmael's realization that he has the power to shape his identity and his life—and that he isn't destined for failure and mediocrity.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Greenwillow Books edition of *Don't Call Me Ishmael* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ So, first things first. My name is Ishmael Leseur.

Now, wait on, I know what you're going to say—I have the same name as my condition! You probably think I just invented it, so I can use it as an excuse whenever I make a complete fool of myself. But you don't get it. It's not that simple. You have to understand that the name *is* the condition—or at least part of it.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael introduces himself and the syndrome he believes he suffers, which is called Ishmael Leseur's syndrome. Referring to his name as a "condition" shows, from the very start, how much Ishmael resents his name and feels it dictates his identity. In many ways, Ishmael feels trapped by his name (he later goes on to suggest that, for instance, his name triggers "disturbing behavior" in others as part of the condition). So essentially, Ishmael is proposing that he attracts bullying and attention he doesn't want, all because of the name his parents gave him.



But, of course, Ishmael Leseur's syndrome isn't real; Ishmael did invent the syndrome to help explain to himself why he continues to embarrass himself and attract unwanted


attention. And while Ishmael later goes on to blame his parents for this affliction, his tone throughout this passage (and indeed, throughout the novel) suggests that Ishmael feels he has no choice but to make a fool of himself and attract bullying. This speaks to how stuck Ishmael feels in this identity he doesn't really want—he doesn't believe he has the power to change anything or become a person he'd rather be. Ishmael Leseur's syndrome prevents him from doing this, and as part of that, Ishmael doesn't allow himself to try to do anything that might improve how he thinks of himself.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ And if it hadn't been my terrible fate to end up as Ishmael Leseur, then none of the disasters of my life would have happened and today I would be a happy normal teenager, like everyone else my age.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Bill Kingsley, Ignatius Prindabel, James Scobie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael has spent the last several chapters explaining how he got his name, and now, he's blamed Herman Melville (the author of *Moby-Dick*) for his so-called condition, Ishmael Leseur's syndrome. It's a reflection of Ishmael's youth, immaturity, and self-centeredness that he believes he'd be happy and "normal" if he had a different name. The implication here is that Ishmael believes other kids are all happy and normal—which Ishmael himself realizes isn't true as the novel progresses. Scobie is dealing with the trauma of having had brain cancer, while Bill Kingsley has to put up with Barry Bagsley's bullying that's arguably crueler than what Ishmael has to put up with. Ignatius, for his part, has poor social skills, and later, Ishmael confides in readers that he sometimes thinks Ignatius is actually an old man in a teen's body—Ignatius may be happy with his facts and figures, but to hear Ishmael tell it, he's definitely not normal.

Ishmael also never defines what he means by "normal"—normal, to him, seems to just apply to people his age who aren't him. And while it can be more difficult to go through life and teenagerhood with a name that's outside of the mainstream, as the novel progresses and Ishmael shares

more about his classmates, it soon becomes pretty clear that Ishmael is actually not all that different from his classmates, aside from having a more interesting and literary name.


Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ "Ishmael? What kind of a wussy-crap name is that?"

What could I say? Up to this point in my life I hadn't even known it was a wussy-crap name. No one had warned me that I had a wussy-crap name. Why would my parents give me a wussy-crap name in the first place? Was Herman Melville aware it was a wussy-crap name?

Related Characters: Barry Bagsley, Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Mom, Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael is explaining to readers how, on his first day at St. Daniel's Boys School, Barry Bagsley commented on Ishmael's name and immediately marked Ishmael as a bullying target.


What's immediately striking about this passage is that Ishmael never questions Barry's assessment that Ishmael is a "wussy-crap name." He instantly takes it as fact and immediately begins to stress out over the fact that, apparently, his name is terrible. And the fact that his name is awful, he implies, should be something that he, his parents, and even Herman Melville should've known about long before this moment. Part of Ishmael's panic comes from the fact that Barry's assessment comes as a surprise; he's never before considered that his name is a "wussy-crap name," even if Ishmael has—for years, it seems—resented Dad's story of how Ishmael got his name.

Barry's taunt is, of course, a calculated bullying effort designed to make Ishmael feel terrible about himself, and to give Barry more power by putting others down. So this passage also starts to show how Barry goes about amassing power at school. He puts others down and does so with such authority that kids just accept that Barry is all-powerful and the expert on everything, including whether one's name is terrible or not. Ishmael's inability to see this speaks to how self-conscious he already is about his name and his social status at school.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ It soon became obvious to every Year Eight that if you wanted to survive your stay at St. Daniel's Boys School relatively unscathed, there were only two courses of action open to you: either avoid Barry Bagsley at all costs, which was what the majority chose to do, or risk the road less traveled and seek out the dangerous safety of Barry Bagsley's inner circle of "friends."

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Barry Bagsley, Danny Wallace, Doug Savage, Mr. Barker

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis



Ishmael is explaining how he and his classmates get through the day and keep themselves safe from bullying at school: either they avoid Barry, or they join him. First, note that Ishmael insists this is how someone survives school "relatively unscathed." Using "relatively" here implies that everyone suffers from Barry's bullying campaign to some degree, just some more than others. Ishmael never considers it, but this implies that Barry's supposed friends, Danny Wallace and Doug Savage, also feel the negative effects of this culture.

But what's most interesting about this passage is that Ishmael never mentions going to adults for help as an option available to him and his classmates. Later in the novel, Mr. Barker lays out the school's bullying policy (that the administration won't tolerate bullying, and victims should come forward so the perpetrators can be dealt with). Omitting this option gives the impression that despite there being a clear policy in place, students don't trust it to protect them. Instead, they feel like it's up to them to deal with the bullying in whatever way gets them through the day—which, as the novel shows, is almost guaranteed to not actually stop the bullying outright.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ "You see how powerful language can be, boys? Even a little word like 'before' can hurt you if you don't treat it with respect and listen carefully."

Related Characters: Miss Tarango (speaker), Barry Bagsley, Ishmael Leseur

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Tarango has just demonstrated the "power of language" and humiliated Barry in the process (she told him he'd get the week off if he sat in her chair while she circled him three times, but never said when she'd finish the circles).

With this demonstration, Miss Tarango shows that language is indeed powerful. This is a new idea for Ishmael, whose first thought when Miss Tarango introduced this exercise was that maybe he should drop a dictionary on Barry's head. In other words, Ishmael still believed that physical violence is naturally more powerful than words.

Especially when Miss Tarango notes that "before" is really the important word in her statement, it shows that it's important to pay attention to everything someone says. Language, she insists, is nuanced and can mean a lot of different things, if one is willing to dig a little deeper and pick out a different meaning. This sort of thing happens later in the novel, too, as when Ishmael fixates on Barry telling him he "doesn't have a prayer," meaning that Ishmael doesn't have a chance of getting back at Barry. But Ishmael eventually realizes that he can use an actual prayer at the final school event to humiliate Barry. It's important, the novel shows, to look at all possible meanings in situations like these.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ Every atom in my body told me that this was one of those times when the sensible thing to do was to make myself small. A few backward steps and I would be out of sight. Then I could forget all about Barry Bagsley and his mob. But that was just it. I could forget about the rest of them, but I couldn't get the kid out of my mind. I won't lie. I'm no hero. I *wanted* to turn around and run. I *wanted* to make myself small. I *wanted* to disappear. The problem was, I had the terrible feeling that if I did, I might not ever be able to find myself again.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Barry Bagsley, Danny Wallace, Doug Savage, Marty/The Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael has just noticed Barry and his gang tormenting a little boy, Marty, by stealing his hat and playing catch with it.

Ishmael is explaining why he decided to intervene, despite knowing it was a bad idea.

Recall that Ishmael's preferred method of dealing with Barry is to avoid him at all costs. This doesn't guarantee that Ishmael will get through the day unscathed, but it makes it far more likely that Ishmael will be okay. But here, Ishmael suggests that this really only works when he's the only victim, which is the case at school. Though Barry goes on to target other classmates aside from Ishmael, Ishmael seems like the person who takes the brunt of Barry's ire.


Essentially, on the St. Daniel's campus, Ishmael only has to protect and look out for himself, and that suits him just fine.

Things change, though, out in the wider world, where Barry is clearly more than willing to torment more people than just Ishmael. And when Ishmael comes across Barry bullying other kids, he finds it's impossible to just walk away and let it happen. This illustrates how kind and righteous Ishmael is. But he still makes it very clear that he's not brave as he stands up for little Marty—he's just doing something he has to do to be able to look at himself in the mirror every day. With this, the novel positions standing up for others as something that's just the right thing to do. It's not easy—Ishmael makes that extremely clear. But in order to maintain his perception of himself as a good person, Ishmael feels he has to stand up for those who have even less power than he does.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ The class stared at James Scobie. Something wasn't right here. This wasn't the way things went. When Barry Bagsley threatened you, you backed down. That's just the way it was; the way it had always been. You couldn't just go changing things—just doing what you want. The whole room was one big furrowed brow. Something was happening here—we just weren't quite sure what it was.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), James Scobie, Barry Bagsley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Barker has just left the room, and Barry has started to bully Scobie. But Scobie is standing up to Barry and insulting Barry right back.

Ishmael makes it clear that he and all his classmates are shocked and confused by Scobie's behavior. This indicates



that up until this point, nobody has made a concerted effort to stand up to Barry. Instead, everyone has just let Barry have his way and bully people. This harkens back to Ishmael describing kids' two avenues for dealing with Barry: avoiding him or joining him. Just as Ishmael never noted that students have the option of going to administrators, standing up to Barry was never named as an option, either.

Ishmael's tone in this passage is also interesting. Though it's arguably a good thing that Scobie is standing up to Barry (this, after all, is the only way Barry eventually stops picking on people), Ishmael frames Scobie's actions as breaking some unspoken rule. Standing up to Barry is, in Ishmael and his classmates' understanding, somewhat inappropriate. But Ishmael also implies that this is, perhaps, just because everyone has gotten used to Barry being in charge and doing what he wants—to the point that nobody knows they can stand up to Barry. With this, the passage illustrates how Barry has consolidated and then kept his power over his classmates. He's made it seem impossible to stand up to him, to the point that kids have forgotten they could even do that.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ As for Barry Bagsley, rumor had it that Brother Jerome had given him the “last warning” speech. In any case, when he finally returned to class, he was as sullen as a caged animal, a bit like the T-rex at the beginning of *Jurassic Park*, trapped inside that steel enclosure with a zillion volts of electricity zinging through the wires (which was fine by me). The only trouble was, I kept thinking that when you watch a movie like that, you just know that eventually, for some reason or another, someone or something will turn the electricity off.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Barry Bagsley, James Scobie, Brother Jerome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After Barry's failed attempt to frighten Scobie by filling his homeroom desk with insects and spiders, Barry finally suffers consequences—and stops bullying people for a while.



Likening Barry to the T-rex in the film *Jurassic Park* is an interesting comparison. It shows that Ishmael, in some ways, thinks of Barry not as human, but as an animal who's

not only larger than life, but extremely powerful and deadly. This comparison helps explain why Ishmael feels so powerless next to Barry: next to something the size of a T-rex, of course Ishmael—a mortal human who isn't particularly confident in himself—feels small, powerless, and insignificant.

Ishmael also foreshadows Barry's eventual return to power later in the novel, when Scobie leaves school for medical reasons. Again, by likening Barry to a film dinosaur, Ishmael gets to borrow the language and standards of how films progress to create the sense that Barry is a massive, dangerous animal who, like all overly large and dangerous creatures in thrillers, will inevitably return to terrorize people.

☞ “Now, some of you may feel that debating is for wimps. I'm here to tell you that you are wrong. Research shows that most people are more afraid of speaking in public than they are of dying. Debating is not for wimps. It's for boys with courage. That's right, courage—the courage and commitment to stand up and perform under pressure.”

Related Characters: James Scobie (speaker), Barry Bagsley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

During an all-school assembly, Scobie tells his classmates about the new debating clubs and tries to impress upon them that debating is for courageous people, not “wimps.”

Scobie doesn't call anyone out by name, but the way he frames debating in his speech suggests he's talking to people like Barry Bagsley and his cronies when he mentions that some people think debating is for “wimps.” Throughout the novel, Barry shows that he's capable of using language to hurt people and cement his power as the school bully, but he's impervious if anyone tries to use language to get the better of him. But he also combines his verbal abuse with violence, or threats of violence—and makes it clear on various occasions that he believes physical violence will always win out over language. Thus, the novel presents one of its central conflicts: is Barry right, or is Scobie right? Is language or physical violence more powerful?



Scobie, of course, proposes that language is far more powerful than physical violence. He notes that at the very least, speaking in front of people is something that many find frightening, which gives him the grounds to say that

speaking up takes courage. With this, Scobie frames speaking and language as the more difficult road. Physical violence, he implies, is easy to engage in. What's harder, he suggests, is using one's voice to advocate for change.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☞ Even though we had improved from last time, the difference again was Scobie. It was like having Michael Phelps swimming the final leg for you in the under-seven floaties relay. As long as we could keep the opposition vaguely in sight, we knew that Scobie would reel them in and eat them up.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), James Scobie, Bill Kingsley, Orazio “Razza” Zorzotto, Ignatius Prindabel

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael is explaining how he and the other boys on the Year Nine debating team have, against all odds, won their competitions—all thanks to Scobie.

As Ishmael describes the team's upward trajectory, his language shows how cohesive the team is becoming. Notice that he uses “we” to talk about the team. This shows that Ishmael thinks of himself as part of the team (despite not actually ever speaking in debates) and is thinking of everyone as being part of a cohesive whole. They, of course, have their star debater in Scobie—Scobie is capable of bringing everyone together and clinching the wins. As much as anything, it seems like it's Scobie's star power that helps unite the team and turn them into a cohesive, trusting group. And it's just humorous that Ishmael refers to himself and the rest of the team as newbies competing in children's competitions—with Scobie as the real professional around to save them (like legendary Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps). This adds to the novel's levity and humor.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ “Sort of...the tumor, the operation...they’re true. The other thing...not being afraid...Well, it depends on how you look at it. Maybe it wasn’t a scalpel that did it. Maybe...when you’re lying in an operating room and someone is cutting into your brain...and you don’t know whether you’re going to...”

For a few seconds all I could hear was Scobie breathing. When he continued, it was almost in a whisper.

“Well...maybe there’s just so much fear you can have...and in that one moment you use up all the fear you were ever supposed to feel...and it’s the fear that cuts you...and it cuts you so deep that you decide that nothing else is worth being afraid of...and that nothing is going to scare you anymore...because you just won’t let it.”

Related Characters: James Scobie (speaker), Ishmael Leseur, Barry Bagsley

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Scobie has called Ishmael to ask him to fill in for Bill in a debating competition, and Ishmael asks Scobie if it’s true that, as he’s claimed, his brain tumor operation made it so he can’t feel fear.

The fact that Ishmael has asked Scobie about this at all shows how close the boys’ friendship has become. Ishmael trusts Scobie, and he’s essentially asking Scobie to say something that’s going to make Ishmael feel better about having to get up and speak in public—something that terrifies Ishmael.

Scobie’s answer suggests that his original assertion that he can’t feel fear is, in some ways, a bit exaggerated. What Scobie means here is that after facing down surgery that might kill him to remove a tumor that might also kill him, he realizes there’s not much else that’s worth being afraid of. Essentially, he tells Ishmael that there are bigger concerns than things like public speaking or even Barry Bagsley, and in comparison, dealing with Barry and his ilk is just child’s play.

Scobie also introduces the idea that fear (for him, at least) is something of a choice. He’s simply decided that if it’s not cancer or a surgery on his brain, it’s not worth getting worked up over. Notably, this leaves room for the possibility that at one point, something like public speaking or the prospect of dealing with Barry Bagsley *did* scare him. But since undergoing his surgery, he’s decided not to let those sorts of things bother him anymore.

This is revelatory for Ishmael. It humanizes Scobie in Ishmael’s mind, as Ishmael does seem to pick up on the fact that Scobie feels fear—just not about the same things that Ishmael does. And it also suggests to Ishmael that if he really wanted to, he could stop giving Barry so much power and realize that Barry is so frightening, in part, because Ishmael believes he is.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☝☝ “Well, I guess you could say that part of it’s about how power can be used in a good way or a bad way, and you could tie that to things like the power that big companies or politicians or dictators have today, I suppose. And Harry himself faces a lot of problems that I reckon would be relevant to a lot of people—you know, like coping with death and trying to fit in when you’re different...and bullying.”

Related Characters: Bill Kingsley (speaker), Ishmael Leseur, Orazio “Razza” Zorzotto, Ignatius Prindabel

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

The debating team (except for Scobie) is preparing for their semifinal debate. The topic is Bill’s area of expertise; they have to prove that sci-fi and fantasy are relevant to real life. Here, Bill is talking about the Harry Potter series.

Bill easily proves to his teammates that fantasy and sci-fi are relevant to real life in this passage. In addition, he also starts to become a three-dimensional person in their eyes. Prior to this, his teammates have mostly thought of Bill as just a warm body on the team, not someone who could actually lead the team to victory. But here, Bill shows that he’s capable of critical thought, of rebutting (which he’s struggled with in the past), and of working as part of the team.

What Bill says specifically about how Harry Potter is applicable to real life also encapsulates some of the novel’s main ideas. Though Bill talks about the power struggles in Harry Potter in terms of “big companies or politicians or dictators,” Ishmael is locked in a power struggle of his own with Barry Bagsley. And as Ishmael goes on to discover, the power of language is something he can use for good or for evil. He can use it to stand up for others and support his friends, as he does elsewhere in this chapter when he speaks in support of Bill. Or, he can use it for evil, as when

he plans to humiliate Barry at the final school function. While *Don't Call Me Ishmael* doesn't get into dealing with death and grief, it does focus intensely on bullying—just like Harry Potter. So fantasy, Bill shows, isn't just a way to help people make sense of the real world. It can also add layers to a more realist novel like this one that grapples with some of the same questions and issues.

☝ “Oh, and Orazio...I know we're not headed for Mount Doom or anything, but we *are* on a bit of a quest, aren't we? Maybe we're even some sort of a fellowship.”

Razza sprawled back in his seat and shook his head slowly from side to side as if nothing made sense to him anymore. Finally he stood up, leaned over the table, and placed his hand on Bill's shoulder.

I held my breath. I had a terrible feeling that Orazio Zorzotto's razor-sharp wit was about to slice Bill Kingsley in two.

Razza fixed his eyes on the large form before him. “I will follow you,” he said solemnly, “my brother...my *captain*...my...Kingsley.”

Related Characters: Bill Kingsley, Orazio “Razza” Zorzotto (speaker), Ishmael Leseur, Ignatius Prindabel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

The debating team is deciding on their lineup and who will be captain for the semifinals; Razza isn't initially convinced that Bill should be captain and speak last (this is the most important speaking position).

In this passage, Bill again uses his belief that sci-fi and fantasy are relevant to real life to convince Razza to agree with him. This is what Bill has spent the last 20 minutes proving to his teammates—and it's become clear to all of them by this point that Bill is the expert among them on the subject. By likening their debate competition to a quest, like the one characters go on in the *Lord of the Rings* series, Bill shows that fantasy is relevant. As he notes, they're not headed for Mount Doom—but they *are* on an impossible journey to win a debate without Scobie's help, on a subject that only one of them knows well. And noting that they're a fellowship is another nod to *Lord of the Rings*, but it also shows how far the boys' friendship has come. By this point, they are all friends—and they're getting better at supporting each other.



Though Razza has been unconvinced that Bill should speak

last and be captain, he finally concedes that Bill and his teammates are right when he promises to follow Bill. And the way he says this is a play on a famous line from *Lord of the Rings*—although it's tweaked a bit (the original is “my brother, my captain, my king”). This shows that though Razza isn't the expert that Bill is, he is knowledgeable on the subject. This gives him and Bill something more to bond over, and it allows Bill to understand clearly that Razza is here to support him. And later, their shared appreciation for fantasy and sci-fi (though Razza's appreciation is significantly less than Bill's) allows Razza to support Bill when Barry is cruelly bullying him.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☝ Razza nudged me in the ribs and jerked his head toward Bill Kingsley, who was gazing into space beside him. I knew what Razza was getting at. Bill looked different somehow. It must have been the smile on his face.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Bill Kingsley, Orazio “Razza” Zorzotto

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

The adjudicators are deciding which team won the semifinal debate, and Razza and Ishmael notice that Bill—who captained the Year Nine St. Daniel's team and is an expert in the debate subject—is, for once, smiling.

Since Ishmael first introduced Bill to readers, he's never described Bill as smiling. Indeed, he's never described Bill as anything but a very large, disaffected boy whose only distinguishing quality is his love of sci-fi and fantasy. But since then, Bill has become a fully-fledged person, with good qualities and quirks, to Ishmael and the other boys on the debate team. The fact that Razza and Ishmael notice how happy and different Bill looks is an indicator of how close their relationship with Bill has gotten. Now that they're friends, they care that Bill is happy—and they celebrate that fact.

More broadly, Bill's happiness proves the novel's point that making friends and getting involved in something that pushes people out of their comfort zones can help people become happier and more themselves. Prior to joining the debate team, it doesn't seem like Bill had much purpose in his life. But now that he's experienced some success debating, he's significantly more confident and secure in his

own skin. His new friendships with his teammates of course help, but he's also finally feeling like he has something to contribute to the world.

Chapter 38 Quotes

☝☝ I looked at Bill. I remembered his face after that last debate. Now he looked numb and broken.

I ripped the certificate from the desk. "That's it. I'm taking this to Barker."

"No, Ishmael, don't!"

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur, Bill Kingsley (speaker), Barry Bagsley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael has just helped Bill track down his missing debating certificate—which they discover Barry has altered with a picture of Jabba the Hutt, a villain from *Star Wars*.

The look on Bill's face shows clearly the effects of bullying. Where Bill was bright, engaged, and proud of himself after the last debate, now it's clear to Ishmael that Barry has made Bill feel terrible about himself. Now, Bill isn't confident, and he isn't whole. As the novel has shown previously when Barry tormented Ishmael, suffering this kind of abuse constantly can seriously damage a person's self-esteem.

Prior to this, Ishmael hasn't given much thought to what happens when Barry bullies other kids (saving Marty was framed as a rare exception). But now that Bill has become a close friend of Ishmael's, it's too painful and enraging to see him hurt. This continues to develop Ishmael as someone who can take the bullying when it's directed at him, but can't stand by when Barry targets other people whom Ishmael loves or who aren't good at standing up to the abuse themselves.

This passage is also significant because this is the first time that Ishmael has even acknowledged that going to an adult for help is an option. It's hard to tell if Ishmael now believes going to Mr. Barker is a good idea because he suddenly trusts Mr. Barker, or if this is just a product of Ishmael starting to find his voice. Regardless of Ishmael's reasoning, though, Bill shows clearly that he doesn't trust Mr. Barker and the school's bullying policy to protect him. He believes it's better to pretend it doesn't bother him and let Barry get

his way than to call in an adult—which he and others imply at various points will just turn Bill into an even bigger target.

Chapter 39 Quotes

☝☝ "Why can't you just leave him alone?"

"Maybe I don't want to. Are you going to make me?"

And there it was. The question we'd all been waiting for. The question whose answer I knew, and Barry Bagsley knew, was no. I looked at the smug, arrogant face before me, a face without a shadow of a doubt that it had nothing in the world to fear. I hated it and I hated how it was making me feel. I wanted to blow it away.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur, Barry Bagsley (speaker), Bill Kingsley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael has called Barry out and asked him to stop tormenting Bill Kingsley, but unsurprisingly, Barry refuses. Barry's question to Ishmael, "Are you going to make me," reads as a threat of violence. The implication here is that Barry is asking if Ishmael is going to either try to get physical with him, or tell adults that he needs help stopping Barry's bullying crusade. Ishmael is far too concerned with his own self-preservation to think it's a good idea to get into a physical altercation with Barry, so that option is out. And the novel has already established that many kids at St. Daniel's don't feel comfortable going to adults when they're being bullied, as this turns victims into even bigger targets and doesn't actually stop bullies from bullying them. So in this way, Ishmael feels trapped and as though there's nothing he can do to stop Barry or protect his friend.

Interestingly, as Ishmael describes Barry's apparent lack of fear, he uses some of the same language that Scobie used to describe himself and his own lack of fear. These two boys are, to Ishmael, larger than life figures who, unlike the rest of the student body, don't feel fear the same way. Scobie doesn't feel fear because he doesn't think most things are worth worrying about, compared to a possibly deadly brain tumor. And Barry is convinced that nobody can take him down and make him stop bullying people because he's frightened everyone into submission. Ishmael, on the other hand, does feel fear—that's one of the reasons he doesn't try harder at this point to make Barry stop. And Ishmael's fear and his belief that he's powerless contribute to his

growing anger.

Chapter 40 Quotes

☝☝ “What’s he like?”

“My father?”

“No—*Ishmael*—the person you’re named after.”



“Oh yeah, right,” I said, feeling like a dork.


“Well?”

“What...oh...I don’t know what he’s like. I’ve never read it.”

“Really? You haven’t read it? How come? If I was named after someone in a book, I’d definitely want to read it to find out what they were like. You know, see if I was like them.”

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur, Kelly Faulkner (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

After the debating final, Kelly Faulkner seeks out Ishmael to talk. The conversation eventually turns to Ishmael’s name, and he shares that he hates it and that his name comes from the novel *Moby-Dick*.

Up until this point, Ishmael has been pretty confident in the fact that he hates his name and hates the fact that he’s named after a fictional character. Kelly seems to bring him down to earth when she asks what Herman Melville’s Ishmael is like, and why Ishmael hasn’t bothered to take the time to read *Moby-Dick* and find out. This introduces the possibility that Ishmael might not be totally validated in hating his name—at least not for the reasons he says he does. He could certainly read *Moby-Dick* and discover that Ishmael is a wholly unlikeable character, but at this point, it’s unclear if that’s what will happen or not. This also shows that in general, Ishmael is missing a whole lot of information about his identity and his history. Again, there’s no telling at this point how alike Ishmael and Melville’s Ishmael are. But until Ishmael reads the book and finds out, he doesn’t have access to information that will help him figure out who he is, and who he wants to be as he grows up.

☝☝ And then it happened. Kelly Faulkner laughed, and her beautiful pale eyes melted my heart like ice cream in a microwave till all that remained was an awful empty feeling. That’s when I knew. Nothing would happen between us. I’d been kidding myself. It just wasn’t possible for eyes as beautiful as that to see anyone as ordinary as me. For the first time, I didn’t feel like a nervous wreck in Kelly Faulkner’s presence. What did I have to worry about?

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Kelly Faulkner, James Scobie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

When Ishmael makes Kelly laugh after the debating final, he suddenly realizes he doesn’t have to be self-conscious—he decides that nothing is going to happen between them anyway, so it’s not worth worrying about it.

Ishmael frames his sudden realization as a negative thing. This reflects his lack of self-confidence. He doesn’t see himself as funny, interesting, or charming, so obviously, he reasons, Kelly isn’t going to want to have anything to do with him. (This, of course, ignores the fact that Ishmael has just made Kelly laugh and recently rescued her brother from bullies—objectively, he’s doing pretty well. But he’s too self-conscious to realize this.)


But though Ishmael doesn’t quite pick up on it, what happens here is a lot like what Scobie described happening after the surgery on his brain tumor. Ishmael has the sudden realization that it’s not worth it to be afraid of Kelly, just as Scobie decided that compared to cancer, there’s not much worth worrying about. In both cases, this allows the boys to loosen up and do things they wouldn’t otherwise do—such as, in Ishmael’s case, continue to talk to Kelly and draw her in even further.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☝☝ The second thing I decided to do was ask Dad if I could borrow his copy of *Moby-Dick*. “Aarrgh, me hearty,” he said, rolling his eyes crazily, “ye be seeking the white whale!” I wasn’t, though. I be seeking Ishmael.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur, Dad (speaker), Kelly Faulkner, Barry Bagsley

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

After talking with Kelly at the debate finals, Ishmael decides it's time to read *Moby-Dick* and figure out what his namesake is all about.

Dad is clearly making a joke and playing when he puts on the crazed captain voice and suggests that Ishmael is after the white whale in the novel, *Moby Dick*. But he also suggests that the conflict between Captain Ahab and the whale is the reason that people read the novel. Even though Ishmael insists that at this point Dad is wrong, Dad ultimately ends up being right—Ishmael finds he identifies with Captain Ahab more than he does with his namesake, the narrator, and even likens Barry Bagsley to his own real-life white whale. And though *Moby-Dick* isn't sci-fi or fantasy, whose relevance the boys defended during the debate, this also shows how literature more broadly can apply to people's everyday lives.

But for now, Ishmael's project is to figure out who he is. And this means confronting one of the demons of his past: the fact that his parents named him after the narrator of a famous American novel. Up until this point, Ishmael has just resented his name and his parents for giving it to him. He's seen the name as a curse designed to make his life miserable. Now, though, Ishmael is in a more open place where he's willing to do some soul searching and some research—and figure out who, exactly, he is.


Chapter 42 Quotes

☛☛ But there was someone else onboard the *Pequod* who I could relate to. Maybe I hadn't lost my leg to a great white whale like he had, but I understood what it was like to have a part of yourself torn away, and I also knew how much you could grow to hate whoever or whatever it was that had taken that part from you. I knew all about that, because every time Barry Bagsley taunted me and ground my name into the dirt, and every time he paid out on Bill Kingsley and I did nothing, it felt like there was much more of me missing than just a limb. But was I really like Ahab? Did I crave revenge like him? Would I really like to hunt down Barry Bagsley and harpoon him and make him suffer for what he had done?

You bet.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Bill Kingsley, Barry Bagsley

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

As Ishmael reads *Moby-Dick*, he realizes he has nothing in common with his namesake, the novel's narrator—but he does identify with Ahab, the captain who seeks out the white whale *Moby Dick* and wants desperately to kill him.

Reading *Moby-Dick* doesn't do exactly what Ishmael figured it would. Ishmael doesn't feel any real connection to his namesake, whom he figured he'd resemble in some way. But this turns out to be freeing for Ishmael, as evidenced by the fact that he seems to have no qualms about admitting that he identifies far more with Ahab than with Melville's Ishmael. Ishmael is learning that his identity isn't something set in stone. As he learns new information, he can continue to shape himself and figure out who he is.

More than anything, *Moby-Dick* gives Ishmael the language to talk about how he feels about Barry Bagsley. Barry is, in many ways, Ishmael's own white whale, who's made Ishmael's life difficult and who dominates Ishmael's every thought. This shows how extremely angry Ishmael is about Barry at this point. Months ago, Barry was a nuisance who made Ishmael feel bad about himself, but it didn't seem to affect Ishmael as much as Barry's bullying does now. Some of this has to do with the fact that these days, Barry is targeting Bill more than he's targeting Ishmael, and Ishmael can't bear to see his friend hurt over and over again. And all of this starts to coalesce into Ishmael's desire for revenge. He's no longer content just getting by; he believes Barry should pay for what he's done.



Though Ishmael doesn't find much use for Melville's Ishmael, this passage does show that Ishmael is finding that the language in *Moby-Dick* is something that's influenced his thinking even before reading the book. Ishmael has, in fact, described Barry's bullying as akin to Barry ripping off one of Ishmael's limbs and leaving him bleeding. Ishmael suggests in this passage, though, that he's not just missing a limb: he's also missing part of his soul. This again highlights the terrible effects of bullying on everyone, not just a bully's direct victims.

Chapter 45 Quotes

☝ I let my eyes drift over the words. They seemed so simple, so harmless—just marks on a page. I read them to myself for the hundredth time.

Let us pray that Barry Bagsley can learn to let other people be themselves instead of bullying them and putting them down all the time.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Barry Bagsley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis


Ishmael is preparing to read this prayer aloud at the final school event of the year, rather than the prayer that a teacher helped him write. His goal is to humiliate Barry Bagsley.

In this passage, Ishmael shows that he now understands the true power of language. One of the ways that language can be powerful is that it's easy to underestimate—after all, written words are “just marks on a page,” as Ishmael notes here. And “marks on a page” aren't usually as obviously flashy or menacing as overt physical violence. Some of language's power comes in its ability to hide and look like something totally normal—until, of course, someone catches onto what the words mean.

Ishmael also shows that he realizes he doesn't have to fight Barry in order to get the better of the bully. All he has to do—all he plans to do—is use these words to reveal to everyone in attendance that Barry is a bully and should suffer consequences for his actions. Words, Ishmael knows now, can do just as much damage as anything else. And in this moment, because Ishmael knows Barry can't stop him, Ishmael feels far more powerful than he has at any other point in the novel.

☝ I could tell she was asking if he was alright. It had to be Mrs. Bagsley, but it didn't seem possible. It was hard enough imagining Barry Bagsley with a mother at all (surely he was thrown together in some dingy rat-infested laboratory) let alone one who looked...well...nice.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Barry Bagsley, Mrs. Bagsley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael is onstage, struggling to start his prayer (which he rewrote to humiliate Barry in front of everyone) when he notices Barry's parents—who both look shockingly nice.

Much of Ishmael's shock comes from suddenly realizing that Barry is a person, just like him. Barry wasn't created in a lab; he didn't emerge fully formed into the bully Ishmael knows him as. Rather, whatever his behavior is like at school, Ishmael can tell from many yards away that Barry has parents at home who love and support him—possibly just like Ishmael's parents love and support him. This forces Ishmael to question whether he wants to go through with humiliating Barry. If Barry is a person just like Ishmael, is it really appropriate to humiliate him in front of everyone—including his very nice-looking mom?

Ishmael eventually concludes that he shouldn't humiliate Barry. But realizing that Barry has parents who seem nice still brings about a change in how Ishmael sees his adversary. Suddenly, Barry stops looking all-powerful. He's no longer described like a T-rex, as Ishmael did at the beginning of the novel. Rather, Barry becomes fully human, and this deprives Barry of a lot of his power.

Chapter 46 Quotes

☝ But there was another reason why I couldn't go through with it. It was that look on Barry Bagsley's face, the one that I had put there, the one that reminded me of Kelly Faulkner's little brother, of Bill Kingsley, and of myself. I didn't want to be the kind of person that made people look like that. No matter who they were.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Barry Bagsley, Bill Kingsley, Marty/The Boy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael is explaining to readers why he didn't go through with humiliating Barry in front of the entire school, including teachers and parents: he couldn't deal with becoming a bully himself.

Ishmael's choice and his explanation show how his ability to empathize has developed over the course of the novel. It also shows that now, he sees Barry as a person, just like

everyone else at school. Ishmael is no stranger to being a victim of bullying—Barry, after all, has made Ishmael's life miserable daily for the past two years. So Ishmael is well aware of what it's like to be torn down and made to feel terrible and small. And because he now sees Barry as a person, too, he realizes it would be inappropriate to make Barry feel that way. Barry might be a bully, but the hope is that simply the threat of being exposed to everyone will calm Barry down. And in doing this, Ishmael shows what kind of a person he wants to be: someone who's kind and empathetic, even when being that way isn't easy.

With this, Ishmael also discovers where language's true power comes from. Speaking out is, he knows from debating, a great way to gain power. But he also realizes that in order to most appropriately use language, it's essential to know when to speak up—and when to be quiet. In this situation, Barry knows what Ishmael planned to say. He felt the fear that Ishmael wanted him to, and even seemed to feel humiliated for a moment. But Ishmael also realized that holding that power over Barry for a few minutes was enough; it was unnecessary to actually say something to the entire assembly.

☝ I heard a strange noise come from deep within Bill Kingsley. It took me a moment to realize that he was laughing.

Razza looked back at me, flashed that deadly smile, and gave me the thumbs-up.

They were right all along. The Razzman really did work in mysterious ways.

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Orazio "Razza" Zorzotto, Bill Kingsley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

Razza has decided that he, Ishmael, and Bill are going to have a movie marathon for one of Bill's favorite sci-fi franchises this weekend; he's joking with Bill about what the marathon will entail.

Over the course of the novel, Ishmael and Razza have gradually become close friends. Ishmael trusts Razza to be there for him, and Razza has notably offered his support if Ishmael ever wants to take on Barry Bagsley. Razza has said before that he'll take care of things and make sure that Barry's bullying crusade against Bill eventually stops.

At first, Ishmael seemed to take Razza's promise as a threat of violence or intimidation. But now, Ishmael realizes that Razza actually meant something very different. Razza's quest is actually to make Bill feel supported and as though he has friends to lean on. His friendship with Razza, in other words, is what's going to make it easier for Bill to deal with Barry's abuse, as Razza isn't afraid to tell Barry to back off and is also always able to make Bill laugh. And Ishmael suggests through the framing of this passage that Razza's ability to make people laugh is a mysterious superpower. This drives home the novel's suggestion that while bullying might never disappear entirely, close friendships can help soften the negative effects of bullying.

Chapter 50 Quotes


☝☝ But do you want to know the really weird thing? Well, I'll tell you. The really weird thing was that as I lay there with only the raspy sound of my breathing filling my ears and with the spongy grass of St. Daniel's playing fields buoying me up, I could have sworn that I was floating and bobbing on the surface of a vast green ocean. Remind you of anyone?

Go on—call me Ishmael if you like.

After all, as the Big Z would say, I'm da man!

Related Characters: Ishmael Leseur (speaker), Kelly Faulkner, Orazio "Razza" Zorzotto

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael has just run and thrown himself onto a St. Daniel's sports field after receiving a letter from Kelly, inviting him to a party.

When Ishmael says he feels like he's floating on a green ocean, this is a nod to the closing chapter of *Moby-Dick*. *Moby-Dick* ends when the whale Moby Dick crashes into the Pequod, taking Ahab down into the ocean with him and drowning everyone else on the ship—except for Ishmael, the narrator. By using this framing, Ishmael shows that he thinks of himself as a survivor. He's had a difficult year fighting off Barry's bullying, conquering his fears of public speaking, and tackling his first crush. And against all odds, Ishmael has survived—and lived to tell the tale, which is the book the reader has just read (it's framed as something Ishmael writes sometime after this scene takes place).

When Ishmael invites the reader to call him Ishmael, it also shows that Ishmael has, over the course of the novel, become more comfortable with his namesake and his connection to *Moby-Dick*. While once it annoyed him when people met him and immediately said, “Call me Ishmael” (which is the first line of *Moby-Dick* and an extremely famous line in literature), now, it doesn’t bother him so much. Ishmael understands what the line and the book are all about—and having a connection to the novel is no longer a source of pain or shame. Rather, it’s a source of pride.

Finally, Ishmael noting that he’s “da man” according to Razza shows how much influence Ishmael’s friends have had on his transformation. Razza has written on notecards during debates before that Ishmael is “da man,” and while Ishmael didn’t take Razza’s support seriously then, he does now. His friends have shown him that it’s okay to be himself, try new things, and put himself out there. And thanks to their support, Ishmael ends the novel far more confident and secure in himself and his place at St. Daniel’s than he was at the beginning of the school year.



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

Ishmael needs to tell the truth: he's 14 years old and suffers from Ishmael Leseur's syndrome, which is incurable. His is the only known case of the syndrome. He tried, for a while, to believe it's not a real thing, but now it's unavoidable. To explain, Ishmael says his name is Ishmael Leseur—and yes, that's the name of the syndrome. The name, though, is the syndrome.

None of Ishmael's family members—Dad, Mom, or his sister Prue—suffer from the syndrome. Prue, in fact, is “adorable” and almost a genius. So Ishmael's name must somehow produce a virus that causes the afflicted person to do the most embarrassing things. And he knows who's responsible: his parents. He might be able to forgive them if they hadn't been laughing so hard when they gave Ishmael his name.

Though it's a bit convoluted, Ishmael is introducing the idea that he hates his name and blames it for all his problems. Coming up with this “syndrome” is a way for Ishmael to make sense of whatever problems he faces, and it's a humorous way to convey these problems to the reader.



Part of becoming a parent to a brand-new infant is, of course, getting to name the new addition. So Ishmael suggests that he feels his parents abused their power as parents by saddling him with a name like Ishmael—and to make matters worse, acting as though his name is a joke.



CHAPTER 2

The story of how Ishmael got his name is a favorite in his family, though he hates it. He's heard it so many times it feels like he was there (he was there, kind of). Nobody can stop Dad from telling the story. Once he gets started, the unlucky listener has no choice but to sit through the tale once again. Dad might seem harmless to most, but once he gets going with the story, he's like a “runaway semitrailer” that ends up in someone's living room.

Ishmael's second theory about Ishmael Leseur's syndrome is that it can trigger “disturbing behavior” in other people. He used to think it only triggered odd behavior in Dad, but then he met Barry Bagsley and learned that his name can bring out the absolute worst in people. But now it's time to hear the story of how Ishmael got his name.

Here, Ishmael starts to introduce the idea that language is powerful. Describing Dad as a “runaway semitrailer” when he's telling this story suggests that in these situations, everyone else is powerless—there's no option but to listen to Dad's story. Language, this shows, can be used to command attention and center one's own version of events.



Keep in mind that Ishmael, at 14, is probably far less interested in hearing stories from his parents in general—distancing oneself from one's parents is part of growing up. So his referring to Dad's storytelling as “disturbing” may just reflect where Ishmael is in his development.



CHAPTER 3

Mom was due before the end of July. By the time August first rolled around, she'd been in the hospital for a week—and she was “a little emotional.” She kept saying that she felt like a whale, and she didn't see the humor in Dad's insistence that, with her popped-out belly button, it looked like a giant breast was attacking her. One afternoon, Dad excused himself, supposedly to go call family. When he returned, he had a cardboard peg leg, an eye patch, a bandana, and a blue teddy bear taped to his shoulder. He introduced himself as Captain Ahab—who's “seeking the white whale.”

Mom had just taken a drink of water, but she hadn't swallowed yet. Shocked at Dad's appearance, she laughed, spit the water out, and started having contractions. Dad hurt himself trying to get to her and help her, and their firstborn son was born soon after. Then they discussed names—and Dad leaned down to his son as though he were listening. Dad said the baby was saying, “Call me Ishmael.” Mom and Dad howled hysterically, while baby Ishmael “shrieked, like a chainsaw.” Perhaps he knew what Dad did to him.

CHAPTER 4

The real culprit of Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome is, of course, Herman Melville. If Herman Melville hadn't written his famous novel [Moby-Dick](#) 150 years ago, Mom and Dad wouldn't have studied it at university and met each other in their American Literature class. Dad's joke about Mom being a white whale wouldn't have meant anything, and there would be no famous Ishmael to name Ishmael after. Without Herman Melville, Ishmael would be “a happy normal teenager, like everyone else [his] age.”

Ishmael urges readers to go pick up a copy of [Moby-Dick](#) if they don't believe him; all they have to do is read the first three words of Chapter One. These three words are the root of all Ishmael's trouble. Ishmael reads them: “Call me Ishmael.” He sarcastically thanks Herman Melville.

This story gives some insight into Dad's sense of humor, which helps explain where Ishmael developed the sarcastic tone that he uses throughout the novel. But Dad does seem to be making these jokes in attempts to get his wife to feel better, showing that language can, in some cases (though perhaps not in this one), help improve people's outlook. Dressing up as Captain Ahab is a nod to Herman Melville's whaling novel [Moby-Dick](#), and it introduces the novel as a symbol for Ishmael's relationship to his name.



“Call me Ishmael” is the first line of [Moby-Dick](#), which makes it clear that Ishmael was in fact named after [Moby-Dick](#)'s narrator, Ishmael (Ishmael is also a biblical name; it's not just connected to this novel). For Ishmael, it's ominous that his infant self shrieked “like a chainsaw,” as it suggests that even then, he knew Ishmael would be a cursed name. But still, exactly why the name is a curse is unclear.



It's worth looking at Mom and Dad's name choice from a different perspective: it might have been a joke in the moment, but it also seems like [Moby-Dick](#) was a central part of their early relationship. It doesn't seem, from this view, that they were trying to curse Ishmael. Ishmael's insistence that he'd be happy and normal if he had a different name reflects his youth and immaturity—as he'll soon discover, he's not the only teenager who struggles with his identity.



In some ways, Ishmael feels as though Herman Melville's words trap him and dictate the course of his life. His identity, he believes, is so wrapped up in Melville's [Moby-Dick](#) that Ishmael doesn't think he can choose what kind of person he'd like to be—the novel has determined that for him.



CHAPTER 5

Ishmael clarifies that he hasn't suffered from Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome his entire life. It only showed up when he started secondary school at St. Daniel's Boys School. The previous seven years at Moorfield Primary were idyllic, but then everyone went to different secondary schools. Then, to make things worse, his homeroom teacher commented that Ishmael's name was "interesting." And Barry Bagsley exhibited "disturbing behavior" later when he asked, "Ishmael? What kind of a wussy-crap name is that?"

Up to that point, Ishmael didn't know his name was a "wussy-crap" name. Were his parents and Herman Melville aware of this fact? Following this, Ishmael started to feel self-conscious and like "a kid with a wussy-crap name." And the next day, Barry called him Fishtail Le Sewer, and things went downhill from there. Barry now calls Ishmael things like Piss-stale, Stalepiss, and Female, and has turned his last name into things like Le Poer and Manure.

It's interesting that Ishmael didn't start feeling the full effects of his name until transitioning out of primary school—that is, transitioning away from childhood and into his teenage years. This again suggests that it might not just be Ishmael who's suffering. Many kids find this transition difficult. Barry's comment shows that one of the reasons Ishmael struggles is because he's a bullying victim.



Ishmael doesn't even consider that Barry could be wrong. Instead, Ishmael assumes that Barry must be right—and his parents and Herman Melville, either unwittingly or on purpose, gave him a terrible name. In this instance, Ishmael is giving away some of his control. And this shows how bullies like Barry gain power, since it seems not to occur to Ishmael to reject Barry's assessment.



CHAPTER 6

Ishmael and his classmates realized quickly that survival at St. Daniel's meant either avoiding Barry or joining Barry's inner circle. Ishmael, of course, chose avoidance. Since starting at St. Daniel's a year ago, Ishmael has perfected the art of staying invisible. So he doesn't do "stupid" things, like laugh, speak, volunteer for things, or look at Barry. Every time teachers force Ishmael to stop hiding, Barry inevitably asks "What stinks?" Now, Ishmael is preparing to start Year Nine and expects it to be like last year. But he's wrong: this year will be hard and weird, but it'll be the best year of his life.

Here, Ishmael describes exactly how hellish Barry has made his life. Barry has essentially stopped Ishmael from being able to enjoy school or, indeed, participate in the classroom. Instead, Ishmael is forced to concentrate on his own day-to-day survival. And Barry is so powerful that, as Ishmael gets ready to start Year Nine, it doesn't occur to him that things could change—he only knows the year will be great after the fact, when he's writing this account.



CHAPTER 7

It's the first day of Year Nine. Everything is new—aside, of course, from Barry calling Ishmael "Le Sewer." Fortunately, the homeroom teacher, Miss Tarango, arrives. Miss Tarango is like no teacher Ishmael has had before. She's young, pretty, and seems genuinely happy to be teaching at St. Daniel's. She has curly blond hair and dimples when she smiles. Ishmael adores her instantly, but he knows she won't last the term. When she introduces herself and shares that this is her first year teaching, Ishmael realizes she won't last the week.

The way that Ishmael describes Miss Tarango portrays her as sweet and innocent—not the kind of woman, he implies, capable of taking on a school full of boys. And given how Ishmael has described the bullying culture at St. Daniel's, this makes sense—Miss Tarango, because she's female and because of her enthusiasm for teaching, seems wildly out of place and as though she'll be an easy target for Barry.



As Miss Tarango asks everyone to quiet down so she can take roll, Barry says he wouldn't mind "doing a roll with her." Miss Tarango pleasantly tells Barry she missed his comment and then continues to stare at him until Barry and his friends stop smirking. Then, Miss Tarango calls roll and asks Barry to answer with something more polite than "Yo!" in the future. When she gets to Ishmael, she asks how to properly pronounce his last name. Barry cackles that Ishmael's name is Fishtail Le-sewer, but Miss Tarango tells Barry she tries to respect every student by learning their names—and she expects Barry to do the same.

Then, Miss Tarango notes that Ishmael is a famous name in literature. Ishmael feels ready to die as she asks the students the name of the famous novel with Ishmael as a protagonist. Bill Kingsley offers *Star Trek* with genuine seriousness. Finally, Miss Tarango says the novel is **Moby-Dick**. Barry snickers; why would someone title their novel *Moby-Dick*? Miss Tarango says seriously that she's not sure—but it's possible Melville decided on it in the same way that someone could've decided that Barry looked like a Dick instead of a Barry. She suggests Barry could do some research and put together a presentation, which silences Barry.

CHAPTER 8

Ishmael only has a few classes with Barry, though he also has to avoid him at morning tea and lunch. During morning tea, Barry calls Ishmael "Barbie Bimbo's pet student, Fish-whale Le Dick." Ishmael ignores Barry and his friends as they continue to make fun of Ishmael's name. Later, in English with Miss Tarango, Ishmael is intrigued when Miss Tarango insists that language can empower people. Maybe Ishmael can drop a dictionary on Barry.

Then, Miss Tarango hands out sheets of paper asking for five "amazing" facts from each student. Ishmael's five facts are that Prue is a genius, Dad played in a band, Mom is on the city council, Ishmael used to faint during the service when he was an altar boy, and he hates his name.

Barry grows gradually more confident during class until, finally, Miss Tarango asks Barry to bring up his five facts and stop talking to other kids. She studies his list for a long time with no expression. Then, she locks her eyes on Barry and announces that they have one more activity before lunch—and she needs a volunteer.

As expected, Barry immediately starts being rude to Miss Tarango, which suggests that Barry generally expects teachers to put up with his shenanigans. This is reinforced when Barry seems to have no qualms about butchering Ishmael's name in front of Miss Tarango—presumably, teachers usually allow this sort of thing to happen. But Miss Tarango shows quickly that she prizes respect, and she won't allow Barry to walk all over her.



Miss Tarango initially frames introducing [Moby-Dick](#) to students as a fun fact that will make Ishmael feel special and broaden students' horizons. But because Ishmael hates his name and its source, this is just a source of embarrassment for him. For Barry, learning that Ishmael's name comes from a novel titled [Moby-Dick](#) just gives him more ammunition—he's making a penis joke here, which speaks to his immaturity. Again, though, Miss Tarango shows that she can meet Barry at his level—and won't tolerate his rudeness and bullying.



A lot of Barry's bullying, Ishmael implies, takes place during passing periods—times when there aren't as many adults around to see the bullying. Teachers, this suggests, just might not be aware there's as much bullying going on as there is. Ishmael is then thinking very literally about how language might be powerful. He implies that the most powerful thing is brute force and physical violence.



Notice that three of Ishmael's facts aren't even about him—and the two that are don't paint Ishmael in a very good light. This offers insight into how Ishmael sees himself. Ishmael believes he'll constantly be overshadowed by others, and that he's destined to fail.



Readers never learn what Barry wrote, but it seems reasonable to assume that he wrote something rude. This shows again how secure Barry feels in his power. To him, even Miss Tarango—a teacher, who should be an authority figure—is someone to bully.



CHAPTER 9

Miss Tarango says she needs someone brave who's capable of "tackling the power of language." A few boys raise their hands, but Miss Tarango says she should explain the task further. She puts her chair on the platform at the front of the room and says the volunteer must stay in the chair while she, using only the power of language, tries to get him off. She can't do anything to the volunteer—but she guarantees that before she circles the chair three times, the volunteer will have gotten up. The class is disbelieving, but Barry volunteers. Nobody tries to argue.

Barry saunters to the front, where Miss Tarango asks very seriously if he suffers from a weak heart or dizzy spells. He insists she can't scare him off, but she says she's just being thorough—and if he doesn't want to do this, nobody will think any less of him. Ishmael is certain Miss Tarango won't actually hurt Barry—right? Barry sits down and Miss Tarango says he has to face front while she circles the chair three times. He loses if he looks behind him. Barry nods, but he looks slightly less arrogant. Miss Tarango shows him where her circles begin—and says if he wins, he'll get the entire week off. She must be mad; only the principal, Brother Jerome, can promise something like that.

When Barry says he's ready, Miss Tarango walks slowly around Barry. She finishes the first circle, then the second. Barry looks like he's glued to his chair, and Ishmael is certain Miss Tarango is going to fail. But then, she completes the third half-circle and, from behind Barry, picks up a marker to write on the whiteboard. She reminds Barry to face forward as she writes something. The class frowns at her; she must be bluffing. She raises her hand above Barry's head, turns her wrist to look at her watch, and smiles—just as the bell signaling lunch goes off.

Miss Tarango says they're out of time. Barry objects—is he really supposed to sit in the chair all night? Miss Tarango says that's exactly what he agreed to. He can look at the board now if he wants. Barry turns around and reads: "Before I walk around the chair three times, you will be off." Miss Tarango underlines the word "before," and she notes that she didn't say *when* she'd complete her third circle. She'll complete it someday—but Barry has to stay in the chair until she does. To the class, Miss Tarango says that language is powerful: a word like "before" can do harm if you don't respect it. She asks everyone to clap for Barry.

Readers can infer that Miss Tarango is purposefully trying to get Barry to volunteer; this whole demonstration seems designed to take him down a peg. It's possible to see that Barry volunteers because he believes that physical violence is more powerful than language—so in his mind, he's obviously going to emerge victorious if all Miss Tarango has at her disposal are words.



What Miss Tarango proposes to Barry is deceptively simple: she's going to circle him three times, and then he'll get the week off. But note that Miss Tarango is being purposefully vague—she doesn't, for instance, say when she's going to finish her circle, and she may be banking on not being able to (or choosing not to) finish. The fact that even Ishmael is confused and concerned shows that Ishmael is, like Barry, not yet convinced of language's power. He's doubting that she'll win this one, because he doesn't value language yet.



Again, Miss Tarango was purposefully very vague when she introduced this exercise. Recall that she said they had time for one more thing before lunch, which reveals that she knew she was going to run out of time. This exercise establishes Miss Tarango as someone who's capable of standing up to Barry. And the fact that she does so using language shows that language can indeed prevail over Barry's violence.



In this passage, Miss Tarango shares with her students exactly how being vague helped her. She essentially encourages them to carefully consider their words, and to figure out how to use language to their advantage—with a firm grasp of how to use language, they can even triumph over bullies like Barry. And by making Barry seem like a hero who tried his best, Miss Tarango also gives herself plausible deniability: she makes it seem like she's not just trying to humiliate Barry, when really, that's exactly what she set out to do.



This earns Miss Tarango the love and respect of everyone in the class, aside from Barry. After this, Ishmael realizes that she's going to be the best teacher he's ever had.

For Ishmael, anyone who can get the better of Barry is a hero in his eyes. Idolizing Miss Tarango also suggests that Ishmael will go out of his way to learn from her as the school year progresses.



CHAPTER 10

Miss Tarango won her battle with Barry, but Ishmael's battle isn't over. Things are worse now that Miss Tarango has introduced Barry to **Moby-Dick**; now, Barry's cruel names are whale themed. In Miss Tarango's class, he's harmless—all Miss Tarango has to do is invite him to sit in her chair, and he stops acting out. But this means Barry needs an easier target, like Ishmael. In addition to butchering Ishmael's name, Barry also takes to hiding Ishmael's possessions, writing crude comments on Ishmael's homework, leaving food in Ishmael's bag or locker, and shoving Ishmael whenever possible.

Miss Tarango might have created peace in her own classroom. But Barry still has passing periods and other classes where he can torment his victims without fearing getting in trouble. And note that Barry seems to understand the power of language on some level, as one of his favorite methods of torturing Ishmael is to butcher Ishmael's name. He, of course, combines this with physical violence like shoving, but much of his violence is verbal.



Ishmael knows readers are probably wondering why he doesn't stand up for himself—but what would they suggest he do? Threaten to let Dad tell Barry the story of how Ishmael got his name? Flatter Barry by suggesting he take up singing and make lots of people miserable? Bribe him with pocket change? Ishmael could always beg for Barry to leave him alone. He considers doing all of these things, but you can't reason with Barry. So Ishmael does nothing but tell himself that if he ever does take Barry on, he'd be stooping to Barry's level. Really, though, Ishmael is just too afraid of what might happen if he stands up for himself. Once, though, he kind of stands up to Barry.

For the most part, Ishmael doesn't acknowledge that he might have more power than he thinks to stand up to Barry. While Ishmael sees Dad's storytelling as torturous, hearing the story would no doubt just give Barry more ammunition to use to torment Ishmael. Part of the reason Ishmael doesn't stand up to Barry is that he seems to believe that defending himself would mean becoming a bully himself. There are, of course, a lot of things Ishmael can do that wouldn't be bullying—for instance, going to someone like Miss Tarango for help.



CHAPTER 11

On the last day of first term, Ishmael is headed home on the path by the playing fields. Normally, Ishmael can easily avoid Barry after school. But today, Ishmael steps onto the path and sees Barry and his cronies ahead. All he has to do is take the long way home—but then he sees a little boy from Moorfield Primary with Barry. Ishmael realizes Barry and his friends have the little boy's hat, and the boy is crying. Ishmael knows it'd be best to run away. But he knows that if he does, he won't be able to live with himself. So he heads down the path, terrified.

For Ishmael, it's one thing to be Barry's victim. That's something he can deal with, though it's upsetting. But Ishmael can't stand the thought of leaving some poor little boy to deal with Barry on his own. With this realization, Ishmael acknowledges that while it doesn't always seem worth it to stand up for oneself, it is worth it to stand up and protect others.



When Barry and Danny Wallace invite Ishmael to play catch with them, Ishmael suggests they give the boy back his hat. Barry invites Ishmael to take the hat from them. Ishmael knows he can't do anything; he doesn't have superpowers. So Ishmael tells Barry again to give the hat back. Barry promises to give the boy his hat back if Ishmael hands over his own. Ishmael knows Barry won't follow through, but he hands over his hat anyway. Barry, Danny, and Doug toss the hats around while Ishmael and the Moorfield boy watch.

Finally, Barry says this is boring and tosses both hats into the nearby creek. He leads his friends away. Ishmael and the Moorfield boy creep down the bank to rescue their hats. On their way back up the bank, Ishmael jokes that he showed Barry—and he kept his temper while he did it. He usually turns green, but he's just finished an anger management course. This makes the boy smile. Ishmael introduces himself and tells the boy—Marty—to not worry about Barry and his friends; they “haven't got enough brains to even appreciate how stupid they are.” Ishmael notes that the reader probably thinks he'd be proud of himself for standing up to Barry. But all Ishmael can think of is that he'd really like to punch Barry.

CHAPTER 12

A new boy arrives at St. Daniel's at the start of second term. Miss Tarango introduces James Scobie to the homeroom class and, in a tone that demands the boys obey, says she's sure they'll make James welcome. Ishmael immediately sees why. James Scobie isn't different enough to garner sympathy. He's just different enough to make Barry's eyes light up. He's small, with perfectly parted and combed hair. His socks are pulled up and turned down to match, and his shorts are pulled up as high as they can go. But what really sets James Scobie apart is his face. It regularly twists to one side and then the other, while James's eyes pop open and his nose wiggles.

The first time James's face does this, a few boys laugh. Miss Tarango scans the room with a hard stare and most kids stop smiling. Barry, though, looks like he's just gotten a Christmas present. Ishmael feels terrible for James—but he also wonders if maybe Barry will target James instead of him. It's not a nice thought, but he has it anyway. This hope is dashed, though, when Miss Tarango assigns Ishmael to be James's official buddy, since they have almost the same schedule. James takes the desk next to Ishmael.

Ishmael is acutely aware of the power dynamic here. He and the boy are weak in comparison to Barry's gang. So Ishmael decides that his only course of action is to play along with what Barry wants and hope for the best. Ishmael may not think he's doing something noble here, but he's still showing the boy that the boy isn't alone: people will help him.



Ishmael might not be totally aware of what happened here, but he essentially showed Marty that the way to deal with Barry is to be as unemotional as possible. For Barry, the point of stealing Marty's hat was to make Marty cry and try to get it back—so encouraging Marty to just sit back and watch doesn't feel like much, but it transformed what Barry was doing from a game into something boring. But Ishmael doesn't see this. His anger is rising, and he'd still like to take his anger out on Barry physically someday.



In describing James Scobie and how Barry immediately lights up, Ishmael highlights the fact that Barry likes to target people who are different. Ishmael is different because his name is somewhat unusual; James Scobie, on the other hand, is humorously neat and also has this facial tic. Miss Tarango's tone when she introduces James suggests she knows what's going to happen. Demanding the boys welcome James is an attempt to get ahead of Barry's bullying—and it's unclear if this attempt will be successful or not.



This passage highlights how much of Ishmael's brain is dedicated to surviving Barry's bullying crusade. Ishmael knows it's mean, but he also knows it'd be less stressful and painful for him if Barry would target someone else for once. However, it is unclear if Ishmael would actually be able to feel okay if Barry targets James. After all, he couldn't stand by while Barry targeted Marty.



Once James is seated, he carefully takes out his planner and several pens and painstakingly arranges them on his desk. His face twists as he carefully writes his name at the top of the planner's page—his handwriting is illegible. Ishmael notices that everyone, including Miss Tarango and Barry, are also watching James. Barry might as well be drooling. Ishmael knows James will be Barry's favorite target.

Ishmael's narration frames James as a curiosity in every way—which, again, marks him as a prime target for Barry. But it's also worth noting that James doesn't seem to care, or even be aware, that everyone is staring at him. He may be less susceptible to Barry's bullying than Ishmael thinks.



CHAPTER 13

As the class is leaving homeroom, Barry compliments Ishmael on his new girlfriend and shoves Ishmael's shoulder. James Scobie watches Barry leave and asks if Barry is a friend. Ishmael says no, which makes James smile. Then, the boys head to Study of Society with Mr. Barker, who's also the vice principal. Barry is also in this class. When Ishmael and James enter the classroom, Ishmael looks for empty desks. One is in the back by Barry and Danny, two are in the middle, and one is next to Bill Kingsley and the teacher's desk. That one is perfect. And Miss Tarango didn't stipulate that Ishmael has to sit right next to James the entire time. He doesn't want to make things even worse for himself with Barry.

Here, Barry combines verbal and physical bullying to torment Ishmael—and send a message to James that he isn't welcome here. Ishmael seems to be nervous to be more honest, or more open, with James, possibly because he's convinced that James will instantly become Barry's favorite target. Friendship, in this situation, isn't an option for Ishmael because he's far too focused on just getting through the day unscathed. This is also why choosing a desk is such an ordeal for Ishmael.



Ishmael usually avoids Bill Kingsley, but he's never wanted to sit next to him so badly. There's nothing wrong with the guy; he's just very big and very into sci-fi and fantasy. Fortunately, James tells Ishmael they don't have to sit together. James takes the desk in the middle of the room and arranges his books and pens. Ishmael stands still, staring at his options—until Mr. Barker tells Ishmael to sit. Ishmael hurries to the seat next to James and gazes at the empty one next to Bill. James gives Ishmael a smile and a nod, as though he knows everything Ishmael has been thinking. Ishmael figures that if he's going down, he might as well have a good view.

What Ishmael has to say about Bill Kingsley reveals how the social structure at St. Daniel's works. Ishmael defines Bill by this one characteristic (Bill's love of sci-fi and fantasy) and, though there's nothing wrong with Bill, goes out of his way to avoid him. He essentially sees Bill as a one-dimensional caricature, even though he seems to know there's more to Bill than meets the eye. James's knowing look suggests he understands how things work at St. Daniel's—and how difficult this is for Ishmael.



CHAPTER 14

Twenty minutes into class, the intercom buzzes for Mr. Barker. Mr. Barker is the person who gets called whenever something happens (usually Bill Kingsley's mishaps, like swallowing his pen lid or getting his head stuck between the stair railings). This time, Mr. Barker assigns the class a reading and exercises. He tells them to stay in their seats and be quiet—he'll find them at lunch if their work isn't good. With a final warning to Bill to be productive, Mr. Barker marches out of the room.

Ishmael adds more to his assessment of Bill here when he notes that Bill regularly does things like swallowing pen lids. This doesn't make Bill seem particularly intelligent or with it. And Mr. Barker's final warning to Bill suggests that even teachers think this way about him—which shows that teachers are making assumptions about their students just like students' peers are.



Minutes later, a wad of paper bounces off of James Scobie's desk. The second wad hits him in the head, and Barry asks if it's time for E.T. to phone home. In his head, Ishmael tells James to ignore it—but James turns around and stares. Barry asks what James is looking at. Ishmael knows James shouldn't answer. But James considers the question and says he must be looking at "some kind of rudimentary life form." By now, everyone is staring. It's starting to feel like a shootout from a Western. Barry threatens to beat James up if he doesn't stop staring. James stares for another minute before turning back to his work.

Barry throws a huge ball of paper at James, knocking James's glasses askew. He asks if Le Sewer stinks, or if James "just shat in his pants." James slowly puts his glasses on, and then gets up to stand in front of Barry. He calmly says that Barry could absolutely beat him up. But James promises to alert the adults, have his father consult a lawyer, and possibly talk to the media. Then, he asks if "shat" is really the appropriate past tense—though he knows what Barry meant, and he's not at all afraid.

The class stares. This isn't what happens when Barry threatens someone. Barry tells James to run along, but James says he's not afraid of Barry. When Barry asks why and tries to make himself look bigger, James says he isn't afraid of anything.

CHAPTER 15

Barry's cronies hoot with laughter and Barry accuses James of lying. But Ishmael notices that it seems like James is telling the truth: he doesn't look afraid. He didn't even look appropriately afraid when Miss Tarango introduced him to the class—he looked like the *other* boys were the new kids. Disdainfully, Barry asks if James has a superpower or will use magic to turn him into a toad. When James says that wouldn't take much magic, Ishmael realizes this is a boxing match, not a shootout.

Barry's patience is wearing thin. He taps James's chest and reminds James that he could snap him in half. Calmly, James says Barry *must* be brave—he has to look at himself in the mirror. And if it's true that a little knowledge is dangerous, Barry must be deadly. But James says he's not afraid and it has nothing to do with Barry. At this, he brushes his hair away from his left ear to reveal a big scar. He had a brain tumor removed. James and Barry exchange more insults, but Danny asks what happened.

Note that Barry has waited for Mr. Barker to leave the room to start tormenting James. This again shows that bullying is, perhaps, hard for adults to stop because they don't see it happening. When Ishmael insists that Scobie is doing all the wrong things, and that this is turning into a shootout, he essentially implies that Scobie isn't going to win this one. Barry, Ishmael believes, is all-powerful.



James makes the case that Barry might have the upper hand when it comes to physical strength. But unlike the other boys at school, James has no qualms about telling adults what Barry is doing and, if needed, escalating to lawyers and reporters. It is, of course, impossible to tell if James is serious about all of this. But still, James essentially suggests that he's more powerful than Barry because he's willing to speak up.



Ishmael implies that he and his classmates have just accepted that when Barry wants something, he's going to get his way. It never seems to have occurred to most of them that it is possible to stand up and tell Barry no.



As Ishmael thinks through James's apparent lack of fear, he starts to get an inkling that perhaps his fear is what's holding him back. Referring to James and Barry's fight as a boxing match suggests that unlike a shootout (which will end quickly with one person injured or dead), this fight is going to be prolonged. The "punches" (words) might not be able to kill, but they can still hurt.



James's insults are rude, and they might be mean in a different context. But in this one, where Barry always has the power to say whatever cruel thing he likes to people, it's instead humorous and feels cathartic that Barry is being insulted like this. Part of what makes James so powerful in this exchange is that he's outright refusing to play into the usual power structure.



James says that soon after the tumor was removed, he realized he couldn't feel fear. The neighbor's dog tried to attack him, but it didn't make him feel anything. He decided to test it by surrounding himself with bugs, since he used to have a bug phobia. He felt nothing when he let spiders run all over him. Barry suggests that James leap out a window if he isn't afraid. James notes that he's not going to purposefully put himself in danger. Barry says James is in danger anyway. He's going to count to five and if James hasn't moved, Barry will beat him up.

As Barry counts, James praises him for being able to count to five without help. Mr. Barker walks in at that moment and asks what's going on. James tells Mr. Barker that Barry was explaining the bullying policy to him. Mr. Barker glares at Barry and notes that the school doesn't tolerate bullying. Any student who is a victim or witnesses bullying should report it immediately. James says he understands, and he feels he must compliment St. Daniel's quality of education—Barry counted to five without using his fingers. The bell rings and James rejoins Ishmael. He smiles and introduces himself as Scobie.

CHAPTER 16

Barry leaves Scobie alone for the rest of the week, but Ishmael can tell that something is up. Ishmael notices Barry huddling with Danny, Doug, and a boy from Year Ten—which is odd, since the Year Ten boy is brainy and not a sadist. Over the next few weeks, though, the Year Ten boy gives several boxes to Barry and his cronies. Finally, one Monday morning, things come to a head. The Year Ten boy gives Ishmael a note sending him to the office. At the office, nobody knows why Ishmael is there.

Then, when Ishmael gets to homeroom late, Doug is sitting on Scobie's desk and talking to Danny. These two are seldom in class, so this is concerning. And Scobie is missing. Ishmael knows something is up, especially when he realizes Barry is also gone. This isn't unusual, but it does make Ishmael's stomach churn. Danny asks if Ishmael is okay and says that Scobie is fine. He points out the window to where Barry and Scobie are talking. The two shake hands and then head for the stairs. Danny announces to the class that Scobie is going to get his fear back—and everyone can help by staying quiet about this.

While the visible scar makes it clear that something happened to James, it is impossible to verify at this point if what he's saying is true—but at the very least, it seems pretty clear that he's genuinely not afraid of Barry. And keep in mind that Ishmael and his classmates are watching all of this happen, and it's all new for them. His reasons or backstory aside, James is still showing them that it is possible to stand up to Barry.



Getting the formal bullying policy from Mr. Barker raises some questions about Ishmael's previous behavior. Recall that Ishmael insisted that kids' only options were to avoid Barry or join him—he never mentioned going to adults as a valid option to deal with the bullying. So though Mr. Barker might make a good show of not standing for bullying, it doesn't seem like the students believe in his policy or in his power.



Ishmael is very observant and very tuned in to what Barry is up to at all times. So as he watches these odd things happen, it creates tension—for Ishmael and for the reader. The fact that Barry is planning something at all suggests that he's not going to just let Scobie win. Rather, Barry feels he has to get back at Scobie and reassert his dominance over the student body.



Keep in mind that Danny essentially tells his classmates that he and Barry have put together whatever's going to happen next. Even though he warns everyone to stay quiet, this still shows that the bullies are pretty comfortable trusting their classmates to not get them in trouble with the adults. And this shows again how the bullying persists: it doesn't take place where teachers can see it, and kids don't feel safe reporting it.



Moments later, Scobie and Barry walk in. Scobie gives Ishmael a nod, sits at his desk, and unpacks his bag. Then, he lifts the lid of his desk. As soon as the lid lifts, grasshoppers fly out, followed by stick insects as long as rulers. One flies into the fan, which throws its broken body into the blackboard. One clings to Bill Kingsley's shirt until Bill rips his shirt off and throws it over Doug's head. While this is happening, dozens of cockroaches crawl out of the desk. The boy in front of Scobie laughs—until he notices three massive spiders on his shirt front.

Ishmael fares no better than the other boys; the wave of insects is terrifying. After retreating to the far corner of the room, he looks back to where Scobie is sitting motionless, his hands still on the desk lid. Then, finally, Scobie puts his arms down and turns to stare at Barry. A spider as big as a saucer is clinging to Scobie's cheek. Nobody says anything—until Miss Tarango comes in and shrieks.

CHAPTER 17

Miss Tarango's shriek attracts people from all over the school, including Mr. Barker. He gasps in horror at the bugs, living and dead, all over the room. As he starts to growl for the boys to tell him who did this, he stops short and shouts at Scobie to get the tarantula off his face. Calmly, Scobie says it's a harmless Mexican bird-eating spider, but he takes off his glasses and the spider. He corrects Mr. Barker that spiders aren't actually insects, which only infuriates Mr. Barker further.

Mr. Barker asks where the insects and spiders came from. Scobie says they came from his desk, but they're not his and he doesn't know how they got there. Mr. Barker suggests someone put the creatures there as a joke. Scobie agrees that someone else put them there. He stares at Barry for a moment, but he says he doesn't know who did it and doesn't want to unfairly accuse anyone. Mr. Barker asks everyone to open their desks and bags. He finds shoeboxes, jars, and paper bags in Barry, Danny, and Doug's desks.

Recall that Scobie insisted his brain surgery cured him of his fear, specifically of bugs. This prank banks on the belief that Scobie was lying—and, presumably, is going to be overcome with fear just like the rest of his classmates. The fact that pretty much everyone else is upset and frightened humanizes the other boys—they all feel fear, at least in cruelly contrived situations like this.



If Scobie is afraid, he's doing a great job of hiding it—a huge spider on the face would frighten many people. Not showing fear in this moment allows Scobie to get the upper hand over Barry, as he clearly wasn't lying. And now that Miss Tarango knows about the bugs, it seems like only a matter of time before the culprits are found out.



Scobie correcting Mr. Barker is humorous for readers—but it also illustrates just how unafraid he is of the insects and spiders in the classroom. He's far more concerned with correctly identifying the creatures than he is in escaping them, for instance. It seems likely that Scobie's pedantic behavior is as much a show for Barry than anything else.



Scobie (and, recall, everyone else in the classroom) knows exactly who's responsible for putting the bugs in the desk. Nobody else is willing to speak up because they fear what Barry will do in retaliation. Scobie, though, very cleverly refuses to rat Barry out, in the name of fairness and justice. He trusts that Barry will get his comeuppance; he doesn't need to humiliate Barry any further right now.



CHAPTER 18

After the bug incident, Barry's reputation tanks. He's banned from sports for two Saturdays and gets detention for a week. The Year Ten boy, Jeremy Gainsborough, is punished too. He apologizes to Scobie—and a week later, Scobie gives Jeremy a new massive stick insect. Rumor has it that Brother Jerome threatened Barry that this is the last straw, so when Barry returns to class, he's sullen. Ishmael thinks of him as the T-rex at the beginning of *Jurassic Park*, trapped behind an electric fence. He figures someone will turn the power off eventually, but it seems like he's temporarily under control.

Scobie, on the other hand, becomes a hero. Weeks after the incident, just before one of the Thursday assemblies, Ishmael realizes that Scobie isn't still with him. He nervously tells Miss Tarango that he doesn't know where Scobie went, and she points to the front of the hall. Mr. Barker tells the boys to be quiet and the assembly begins. After the usual speeches by Brother Jerome and Mr. Barker, the school captain tries to rev everyone up for the big football game on Saturday against Churchill Boys Grammar. It's an important game; this is St. Daniel's enemy school and if they win, Churchill won't be the undefeated champions of the season.

Finally, Mr. Barker calls Scobie to speak—about debating. People groan. Scobie takes the mic, stares at his classmates, and then begins to recite from *Hamlet*: "What is a man, If the chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more!" Everyone stares. Scobie says that if they don't use their minds, they'll just eat and sleep. St. Daniel's is great at sports, but they must also engage their minds by putting together debate teams. Scobie says that debating isn't for "wimps"—more people fear public speaking than dying, after all. He invites any "courageous" boys to join him.

Then, Scobie recites a poem he wrote to get everyone ready for the game this weekend. When he's done, everyone is silent—and then whoops and cheers break out. Mr. Hardcastle, the sports master and coach, asks for a copy to use to intimidate "those Churchill girls." He also asks Scobie to come to the game. Scobie agrees and asks Ishmael to come with him.

It's no doubt a boon for Scobie's reputation when he replaces Jeremy's stick insect following Jeremy's apology. This marks Scobie as someone who doesn't hold grudges, at least when people apologize. When Ishmael refers to Barry as the T-rex from Jurassic Park, it does suggest to readers that at some point in the novel, Barry will break out of his proverbial electric fence. But for now, Ishmael will be free from Barry's taunting for a while.



It's unclear why Ishmael is so concerned that he lost Scobie—he may be concerned for Scobie, or he may be concerned for himself without Scobie's protection. If it's the latter, this would illustrate how much Ishmael is getting out of his friendship with Scobie. With Scobie to fend off Barry, Ishmael can feel more secure at school. The football game is framed as a unifying concern for the student body, suggesting that the boys, regardless of their differences, can all get behind supporting the team.



Given the way the student body groans when Scobie introduces debating, it seems like many boys at school think debating is for "wimps." It's just talking, after all—and compared to the physicality of football, that's not very exciting. Moving directly from talk about football to debating puts the two activities in direct contrast to each other. And this also encapsulates one of the novel's central conflicts: whether language or physical activity is more powerful.



The success of Scobie's poem to excite everyone shows that language is powerful—even the boys who thought debating (and language) was for "wimps" seem to get excited about it. And asking Scobie to come to the game to help intimidate Churchill's players shows that even someone entrenched in sports, like Mr. Hardcastle, recognizes that language has its place and its uses.



CHAPTER 19

When Scobie and Ishmael get to the stadium, Mr. Hardcastle seats them behind the St. Daniel's bench. The boys watch the players warm up. To Ishmael, the Churchill team seems way bigger. Fortunately, Churchill's biggest, scariest player, Frankie Crow, is out with a knee injury. The first half of the game is a grind. By halftime, each team has one touchdown—and Coach Hardcastle tells Scobie to get ready. Near the end of halftime, Scobie takes the microphone, marches onto the field, and reads his poem. The crowd screams as he recites it and, by the end, the team seems ready to fight.

Throughout the second half, the St. Daniel's team fights hard. But near the end of the fourth quarter, the boys are clearly tired. For no apparent reason, Coach Hardcastle replaces the team's best wide receiver with Peter Chung, who's well-liked but a poor player. His only skill is being able to run. Soon after, Frankie Crow takes the field, his knee bandaged. He takes his place opposite Peter. Peter looks terrified.

With less than one minute left, St. Daniel's lines up for what Ishmael knows will be a pass to Peter. Scobie stands up and starts shouting lines from his poem—and Peter takes off. He and Frankie Crow both leap at the ball and, unsurprisingly, Frankie steamrolls Peter. But Frankie twists his knee and falls. Peter snatches the ball and races down the field, evading a defensive back and stopping right in front of the endzone. Peter plays it up, pretending to listen to the crowd before stepping into the endzone. Coach Hardcastle weeps as the team mobs Peter. Two huge linemen lift Scobie onto their shoulders and parade him around. Scobie shouts for people to come to the debate meetings next week. Ishmael admires Scobie, but there's no way he's going.

CHAPTER 20

On Monday, Scobie casually tells Ishmael that he's put Ishmael's name down for the Year Nine debating team. Ishmael is hysterical and says he can't do it. He'd rather tangle with Frankie Crow than speak in front of people. Scobie says that Ishmael can sit out the first round and then join in, but Ishmael sees that Scobie has no idea how public speaking makes Ishmael feel (like his face is in flames and his legs are made of Jell-O). Scobie obviously won't understand.

Ishmael's observation about the size of the Churchill players shows that he's still not totally convinced that language can win out over physical attributes. And the state of the game by halftime seems to support this: St. Daniel's seems to be struggling. But Scobie's poem also seems to come to the rescue and spur the smaller, weaker St. Daniel's players to try even harder to beat Churchill.



Importantly, the novel never goes so far as to suggest that someone who's bigger or physically violent isn't scary. This is why Ishmael has been afraid of Barry, and this is why Peter is terrified when he finds himself opposite Frankie Crow. But it also seems likely that, somehow, language is going to come to the rescue and level the field here.



Ishmael attributes the St. Daniel's win to Scobie's poem (and Coach Hardcastle, as well as the other players, seem to feel the same way). This is an acknowledgement that carefully chosen language can increase the overall power of someone who isn't as physically powerful (as it did for Peter Chung). But while Ishmael can acknowledge this and agree that Scobie did something amazing here, he's still not fully sold on the possibility that language can help him. This is why he's not at all interested in joining the debate team.



Scobie, remember, is a skilled orator—despite his small stature, he can rev up an entire school if someone gives him a mic. Ishmael, however, is self-conscious about all sorts of things and, it seems, may also be one of those people Scobie mentioned at the all-school assembly who fears public speaking more than dying.

Ishmael says he can't do it, so Scobie asks if Ishmael would do it if he didn't have to speak. This is an interesting proposition—perhaps Ishmael can also join the swim team and not swim, or marry a pretty girl and have kids without having to ever speak to her. Scobie says they can have five boys on their team: three to debate, a reserve, and Ishmael, who can help research and write the speeches. Ishmael knows there's a library at school and how to use it. Ishmael trusts Scobie, but he's still terrified. Scobie says they can go to a debating workshop next weekend. And if more than five boys sign up, Ishmael doesn't have to do it. Ishmael agrees.

Note that Ishmael ultimately agrees to sign up because he trusts Scobie so fully. Scobie has, thus far, protected Ishmael from Barry, so Ishmael sees no real reason why Scobie can't also protect him from having to speak in public. Joining up also starts to push Ishmael out of his comfort zone, which helps jump-start his coming-of-age process. And the fact that Scobie gets Ishmael to agree at all is a sign of how strong Scobie and Ishmael's friendship is.



CHAPTER 21

Enough boys in Year Eight volunteer to form three teams, but few people respond from years Ten, Eleven, and Twelve. On Wednesday, during lunch, Ishmael joins Scobie for the Year Nine meeting. Ishmael can't decide if he wants everybody or nobody to show up. Ignatius Prindabel is the first to show up. Ignatius is an interesting volunteer. He's smart and memorizes facts and figures, but he refuses to think creatively. Ignatius says he's here because, according to his mother, he needs more "social interaction skills."

Ishmael demonstrates his critical thinking skills when he notes Ignatius's qualities that will be helpful for debating—and his qualities that might make him difficult to work with. It's humorous when Ignatius says he's only here because his mom made him come—it makes him look hilariously unengaged. But it also shows that in a sense, he's a lot like Ishmael: both boys need friendship to help them become better rounded people as they grow.



Next, Orazio Zorzotto—Razza—walks in, making bad jokes as usual. His presence makes sense: he wants to be a politician or a stand-up comic, so he needs the public speaking practice. Razza tells Scobie that he's in because they'll be competing against "chick schools." Moments later, Bill Kingsley comes in asking if this is the first meeting for the chess club. Scobie says it's debating, and Bill agrees to join. Razza notes that there's a big difference between chess and debating and asks Bill if aliens took his brain.

Things get even funnier when, with Razza and Bill's arrival, it starts to look like Scobie is the only person who wants to be in the debating club because he wants to debate. Getting the team to work together toward a common goal starts to look like a tall order. Razza's teasing of Bill shows that many kids, not just Ishmael, look at Bill as checked-out and too obsessed with sci-fi and fantasy.



Scobie glares at Razza and announces that they've all been selected for the Year Nine debating team. Razza leaps up to thank his family, God, and his pets for his success. Scobie continues to glare at Razza as he hands out info sheets with the dates and locations for the first four debates. They have to win three in order to make it to the semifinals. Scobie says he'll be the coach. They have three weeks to prep for the first debate, and they should all plan to go to the workshop at Moorfield High on Saturday. Ignatius has scouts, and Bill says he's seeing a *Lord of the Rings* marathon. Razza brightly says that they'll win if they ever have to argue that hobbits are less intelligent than dwarves. He says he'll go if some of the "chick schools" will be there.

As Razza demonstrates, language can just be annoying—and this gives Razza some power, albeit a different kind than someone like Scobie has. Razza's power is in being able to elicit laughs (from readers, at least) and deploy cutting insults, as when he notes that they'll win if they ever get a question about fantasy books and movies. The implication, of course, is that they'll never get such a topic, so they'll never win. And this frames Bill as a useless member of the team, since according to Razza, fantasy is the only thing Bill knows well.



Scobie says the next meeting will be Tuesday (Razza tells Bill to put it in his commander's log) and then says that debating is about teamwork. They must work together, help each other, and present a united front. Ishmael stares at his teammates. Razza is circling the girls' schools on his sheet and is giving them a "Razza Babe Rating." Ignatius is working on mathematical equations, and Bill is doodling a spaceship. This is going to be great.

At this point, Ishmael agrees with Razza that the team isn't going to do very well. They don't seem at all united, especially with Razza constantly insulting Bill. And also recall that Ignatius and Ishmael, at least, don't actually want to be here. So the team has an uphill climb—before they can possibly win debates, they must figure out how to work with each other first.



CHAPTER 22

The workshop at Moorfield High *should* be useful and informative. Instead, it just humiliates Ishmael further. He first notices Kelly Faulkner in the morning—and Razza notices Ishmael noticing Kelly. At lunch, as Razza and Ishmael wait for Scobie to come out of a classroom, Razza tells Ishmael to stop drooling and "perving" on Kelly. He suggests Ishmael go talk to her (this will never happen). When Ishmael insists he hasn't been staring at anyone, Razza asks him to prove it by listing the four steps of effective rebuttal—they just had a talk on them. If he wasn't staring at Kelly, he must know the steps.

The fact that Ishmael has developed a crush at all is a sign that he's growing up and starting to come of age. But it's not so easy, this passage shows, to balance normal milestones like one's first crush with the task at hand: learning to debate and deflecting Razza's teasing. Surprisingly, for his part, Razza seems to be taking this workshop seriously, which shows that he may become a far more useful asset to the team than Ishmael initially expected.



Ishmael insists he doesn't have to do this, but Razza grabs Ishmael's shirt and curses Cupid. Then, Razza lists the four steps and says that instead of learning them himself, Ishmael was "logged on to the website of luuurve!" Ishmael calls Razza mad. To demonstrate his mastery of the subject, Razza says that, first, Ishmael has called him mad. Two, Ishmael is wrong because he has no medical training. Three, Ishmael is accusing Razza of madness to distract from the fact that he's been ogling Kelly. Four, Razza says he's right because he's the Razzman, the "doctor of luuurve." Ishmael wants to kill Razza.

The simple fact that Razza can use the four steps of effective rebuttal to prove that Ishmael wasn't paying attention shows how engaged Razza is. He may still be saying some silly, ridiculous stuff, but he clearly understands how rebuttal is supposed to work. Ishmael, however, doesn't see the humor in this, as it's far too embarrassing for him to have a crush at all and have Razza point that out. Ishmael is starting to grow and change, and for now, that's uncomfortable for him.



Just then, Scobie comes out of the classroom. Razza informs Scobie that Ishmael didn't learn anything in the last session and asks what's gotten into Ishmael. Scobie squints and says that Ishmael was too busy staring at Kelly. Razza whoops.

When even Scobie notices that Ishmael has developed a crush, it indicates that Ishmael's crush is extremely obvious. This makes it even more humiliating for Ishmael, since he usually likes to hide his personal thoughts and feelings whenever possible.



CHAPTER 23

Ishmael dedicates himself to taking as many notes as possible for the rest of the workshop. If he even happens to look in Kelly's direction, Razza mimes being shot in the chest with an arrow. In bed that night, Ishmael decides he's not in love. He only knows Kelly's name because they all wore nametags (he put his nametag under his sweater so no one could see it and have a bad reaction to his name). He's definitely not in love, though he did *look* at Kelly. But why couldn't he stop looking at her?

It's an indicator of how self-conscious Ishmael still is that he didn't put his nametag where others could see it—this, of course, entirely defeats the purpose of the nametag. But it also ensures that he can fly under the radar and not have anyone comment on his name. The fact that Ishmael refuses to acknowledge that he has a crush on Kelly reflects his discomfort with having a crush at all.



Ishmael thinks that, during the first session, Kelly was part of a debate presentation. He doesn't usually notice people's eyes—but Kelly's eyes are ice blue, and they sparkle. But that's not love. Rather, Ishmael is just interested in her, and curious about her. She just looks so happy when she smiles and happens to look perfect.

That night, Ishmael dreams that he and Kelly are friends and go to each other's houses. It feels so real that when Ishmael wakes up, he momentarily believes it is real. He spends most of Sunday moping, but every place he goes is just a place where Kelly isn't. Finally, flopping onto his bed, Ishmael wonders if Razza is right. Ishmael decides to use the four steps of effective rebuttal to strike down Razza's ridiculous ideas.

One, Razza says Ishmael is in love with Kelly. Two, Ishmael insists this is false—but then he thinks of Kelly's jeans and her cute smile. Ishmael's chest hurts. He's obviously on the "website of luuurve."

CHAPTER 24

Ishmael decides the best thing to do is to not think about Kelly. He doesn't have a chance with her, whereas he has a "microscopic" chance of winning a debate. The debating team gets their topic ("that our leaders today rely more on image than actions") on Monday. Unfortunately, nobody seems to understand how to work as a team. Scobie tries to organize an argument, Ignatius offers useless information, Bill sits still, and Razza insists the topic is terrible. Instead, Razza talks about "hot chicks," and teases everyone else.

Ishmael offers a sample script of their first meeting. Razza consistently insists they got "the crap side," while Ignatius offers useless political facts. When asked for his thoughts, Bill talks about Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings*. Razza teases him for that, and Ignatius mentions that New Zealand was the first country to give women the right to vote. Ishmael tries to keep everyone on task, but Razza just taunts him.

Ishmael seems pretty smitten with Kelly, despite insisting that he doesn't have a crush on her. As he tries to talk himself out of the crush, he discovers that these kinds of thought exercises can only do so much. Logic won't save him from having to feel these new emotions.



It's starting to look to Ishmael like Razza is right—even if Razza is also "ridiculous." Again, that Ishmael is so smitten with Kelly just shows that he's growing up; what he's going through is normal and expected. But, as Ishmael's discomfort with the whole thing shows, a crush being normal doesn't make it easy or comfortable to deal with.



Finally, Ishmael has to accept that Razza was right. This is a first step toward starting to trust Razza and see Razza as an insightful friend.



Notice that, according to Ishmael, the issue is not that they don't understand how to debate. Rather, the issue is that they're struggling to work together toward a common goal. This suggests that if the boys want to succeed, they're going to have to work on their friendships (or, at least, their working relationships) with each other.



While Ishmael's script is humorous, it also makes it clear that the debate team has a huge challenge ahead of them. Bringing everything together into a cohesive argument—and indeed, a cohesive team—seems, at this point, an unlikely outcome.



CHAPTER 25

Somehow, Scobie pulls the team together in time for the first debate. Ignatius speaks first, then Razza, then Scobie—and somehow, they win. Ignatius is a lifeless speaker, while Razza relies on his wit and charm (this is a bad idea). Between those two and the three guys on the other team, the whole debate should've been a disaster. But Scobie saves the day. He takes apart the opposition's poor argument and shows clearly why his team is right. The winner is obvious.

After this win, the debate team has some idea of what they're supposed to do. For the second competition, Bill Kingsley goes first—he won't have to rebut at all, and Bill is incapable of formulating counterarguments. His usual response to anything is that it's a good point, or that everyone can have their own opinion. Even though Razza is rude to one of the girls on the opposing team and Bill just reads his speech, they win this debate as well. This is, again, thanks to Scobie—he's like having Michael Phelps on a kids' swim team. The team wins their third debate as well, which qualifies them for the semifinals. But of course, things don't stay so perfect.

CHAPTER 26

While all this is happening, Ishmael starts to feel normal. Maybe he's been cured of Ishmael Leseur's syndrome—after all, he's on the successful St. Daniel's debate team, has a friend in Scobie, Barry isn't tormenting him anymore, and Kelly Faulkner might even be a possible love interest. Mom and Dad even notice the change, and Prue is impressed. This is a real compliment coming from her, since she regularly steals the limelight.

To demonstrate how Prue does this, Ishmael tells the story of "the Clash of the Peg People." In Year One, Ishmael's teacher assigned the class to make people out of pegs (clothespins). Ishmael made Batman and wrapped black tape around the peg to give it muscles. Ishmael was so proud—until one of his classmates incorrectly identified Batman as "the fat controller from *Thomas the Tank Engine*."

When the team wins thanks to Scobie's debating skills, it suggests that someone like Scobie (who understands how to effectively use language) can, in some cases, cover up the fact that the team isn't working well together. But this is also a lot of pressure on Scobie. In this way, the novel indicates that the others are going to have to step up—they might not always be able to rely on Scobie.



Having won once, the team starts to get the hang of debating and of working together. They're starting to get to know each other and their strengths and weaknesses, as evidenced by putting Bill first so he never has to rebut. So the team is still struggling, but they're also figuring out how to play to their strengths. Ishmael, though, introduces some tension when he notes that things won't stay so great—something bad is going to happen.



Bringing up Barry here highlights that Barry has been conspicuously absent for many chapters now. And with Barry gone, Ishmael is starting to feel more normal. This opens up the possibility that perhaps Ishmael is more normal than he thinks—it may be that Barry's bullying campaign is really what makes Ishmael feel abnormal.



It's impossible to tell for sure, but it could be that Ishmael's classmate wasn't being serious and, instead, was bullying Ishmael by incorrectly identifying Ishmael's peg person. If this is the case, the fact that Ishmael doesn't see it suggests that Ishmael doesn't fully comprehend how significantly bullies impact his life and his self-esteem.



When Prue got to Year One, she of course took things a step further. She made 10 peg people, using a *Time* series on the most influential people of the century as inspiration. She didn't stop there, though. After she made more influential men, Mom suggested Prue add women like Joan of Arc and writers like Hemingway. By the time Prue was done, she'd made more than 100. Now, Ishmael gets to decide which of history's most influential people get to pin his underwear to the clothesline.

In many ways, Prue simply seems way more driven than Ishmael, which isn't necessarily a value judgment on Ishmael. Prue also doesn't seem to experience the same tenor of bullying that Ishmael does, so she may simply be more comfortable stepping out and trying new things. After all, making 100 peg people doesn't seem like the sort of thing Ishmael would do—if only to avoid Barry's inevitable teasing.



CHAPTER 27

Perhaps feeling normal makes Ishmael drop his guard. But in any case, he's soon going to feel “the full effects” of Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome. It starts on the night of the final preliminary debate against the Lourdes Girls School, when Ishmael gets a call from Scobie. Since Ignatius is busy playing the triangle in the band, the team for the night is Bill, Razza, and Scobie, with Ishmael as timekeeper. But Scobie says that Bill has laryngitis and Ishmael needs to take his place. Feeling suddenly chilled, Ishmael suggests they forfeit. Scobie says they can't; if they do, they can't compete in the finals.

Once again, Ishmael is trying to make sense of this turn of events by blaming things on Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome. The syndrome, of course, didn't actually give Bill laryngitis and necessitate Ishmael having to step in, but it's easier for Ishmael to accept this made-up explanation than accept that sometimes he's just unlucky. Scobie, for his part, is trying to make it seem to Ishmael like Ishmael needs to debate for everyone. This isn't about Ishmael, in other words; it's about the entire Year Nine team.



Ishmael suggests they get a Year Eight to step in and do it, but Scobie says they can't. Ishmael's name is on the registration form. Scobie says he won't *make* Ishmael debate—it's Ishmael's choice—but they'll have to forfeit if Ishmael doesn't debate. Ishmael knows the choice should be easy—he should refuse to debate. But Scobie points out that Ishmael wrote Bill's speech for him and knows the topic better than Bill, and also that they can lose and still go to the finals.

The fact that Ishmael doesn't outright refuse suggests that something is changing for him. Recall that speaking in public makes Ishmael feel ill; now, he seems to be seriously considering it. This reflects both Ishmael's trust in Scobie and Ishmael's strengthening relationships with the other boys on the team. In other words, this choice isn't just about Ishmael—it's also about his friends.



Ishmael thinks of all the times Scobie has been brave: standing up to Barry, reciting his poem at the football game, and whipping the debate team into shape. Hesitantly, Ishmael asks if it's true that Scobie's surgery got rid of his ability to feel fear. Scobie is silent for a minute. He finally says that the tumor is gone. But maybe having someone cut into your brain and knowing you might not survive makes you decide that it's not worth it to be afraid of anything else. Ishmael asks about the bugs and spiders, but Scobie cuts him off—his father studies bugs, so he has never been afraid of bugs. He tricked Barry.

In this passage, Ishmael again establishes Scobie as an inspiration. Ishmael wants to be like Scobie, because Scobie seems fearless. But Scobie's explanation of what the surgery did makes him seem more human. He insists that he can still feel fear—but after facing a cancer that could've killed him, being afraid of anything else seemed silly. So what Scobie really suggests is that fear can paralyze people and make it impossible for someone to live their life.



Ishmael wants to ask Scobie to clarify, but Scobie says Ishmael has to be there in 15 minutes or they forfeit. Ishmael answers that he'll be there and hangs up. He has no time to ask a more pressing question: whether Scobie is really fine, and if the tumor is really gone.

While in the previous passage Ishmael framed Scobie as an idol, here he thinks of Scobie more as a friend. Ishmael is concerned: is his friend actually okay, or is Scobie just saying he is to protect Ishmael? The novel leaves this ambiguous.



CHAPTER 28

Ishmael races around the house, shouting for Mom to tell him where his clean school uniforms are. It feels like a dream where you wake up without pants. Maybe it is a dream. But Mom tells Ishmael to check the clothesline, where Ishmael finds his clothes and leaves some of the world's most influential peg people on the ground in his hurry. Moments later, Ishmael is dressed and in the car with Dad.

On the drive, Dad checks if Ishmael is okay. Ishmael says he is, though he feels ready to vomit and as though an alien is going to burst out of his chest. Dad insists that he and Mom are proud of Ishmael and tells Ishmael not to worry. Fortunately, Ishmael is hysterical, not worried. Ishmael assures Dad he doesn't need to come watch. Scobie is at the school doors and ushers Ishmael into the debate room.

Ishmael takes his seat between Scobie and Razza and pulls out some blank index cards. Scobie passes over Bill's index cards with the speech on them. Razza, meanwhile, scribbles on another card and passes it to Ishmael. It's a drawing of a stick figure with an arrow in its chest. Smirking, Razza nods to the other debate team, which Kelly Faulkner is a part of. Razza passes Ishmael another card that reads, "Hubba, hubba!"

Ishmael comes back to earth when the girl chairing the debate stands, introduces the topic (the private lives of public figures should stay private), and introduces the judges. Ishmael tunes her out and imagines standing up to speak. At this, his legs shake and his stomach churns. He tries to think positive thoughts, such as that this won't kill him, and it could be worse. It really could be worse—Ishmael could lose his words and all his dignity. In retrospect, that would've been better than what actually happened.

CHAPTER 29

The chair calls Kelly to speak first. Razza whispers, "Twang!" in Ishmael's ear, but Ishmael ignores him. He has to concentrate—he must analyze and pick apart Kelly's argument. But as Kelly begins, Ishmael thinks of Kelly's lovely voice and her beautiful eyes. He totally misses her introduction of the theme. Thankfully, Scobie is paying attention; he passes a note to Ishmael with a word, presumably the theme, underlined. But Scobie's handwriting is illegible. Ishmael decides to proceed with getting down Kelly's main points so he can rebut them. He can do without the theme.

Keep in mind that this is one of the first times that Ishmael is going to do something that seriously frightens him. He never expected to find himself in this position. But Ishmael's loyalty to Scobie and the rest of the debating boys won out over Ishmael's desire to protect himself from scary situations.



Dad is trying hard to support Ishmael, but he also doesn't seem to fully grasp how terrified his son is. Nevertheless, this does show that Dad is there for Ishmael; he's not the one-dimensional jerk Ishmael described earlier, who likes humiliating his son by telling the story of how Ishmael got his name.



Dad's questionable support looks excellent compared to Razza's—while Ishmael certainly would've noticed Kelly eventually, Razza is making Ishmael's fear and embarrassment even worse with his taunting. Razza clearly has some things to learn about how to best support his friends.



It's clear that Ishmael is doing everything he can to get through this speech. He doesn't want to let Scobie and the team down, so he knows he has to focus—which, thanks to his fear of public speaking and Razza's teasing, is no small task. And again, it builds tension when Ishmael notes that what's going to happen is far worse than just losing his dignity and not being able to speak.



Ishmael is battling two opposing goals here. He wants to know everything about Kelly, a sign of his burgeoning maturity; and he also wants to take the debate seriously and make his teammates proud. Unfortunately, Ishmael is thwarted at every turn. His crush on Kelly makes it impossible to pay attention, and Scobie is little help when he can only write notes to Ishmael rather than speak to him. Ishmael is, in this sense, on his own.



As Kelly flicks to a new index card, Ishmael notices how cute her hands are and how pretty and shiny her hair is. He comes to when she introduces her second point—what happened to the first one? As she notes that famous people aren't public property, Ishmael realizes that's not a bad point. But then he remembers he can't agree with her. Bill rings the three-minute warning bell; Kelly only has one minute to go. Ishmael tries to recall the four steps of effective rebuttal just as Kelly concludes her argument. Ishmael is next, and he isn't ready.

Ishmael is still more or less on his own, especially since Razza can't, say, remind him of the four steps of effective rebuttal in the moment. Again, it's a combination of Ishmael's overwhelming attraction to Kelly and his fear of public speaking that makes it so impossible for him to pay attention. But Ishmael also agreed to be here to support the team and do his part—so he has no choice but to make the best of it.



Kelly sits down to applause. Scobie pushes index cards with his unreadable notes on them to Ishmael. Razza passes Ishmael a card. It reads, "Your girlfriend's got *hot* legs!" Ishmael knows he's dead as he gathers up all the cards. Something hard pokes him in the groin, but there's no stray pen in his pocket. The chair calls Ishmael up, butchering his name. Ishmael grabs his cards and stands, legs shaking. It'll all be over in four minutes.

Rather than being helpful, Razza is just making things even worse for Ishmael. Then, especially when the chair butchers Ishmael's name, it just adds insult to injury. Ishmael already believes this is going to go terribly. After having his name mispronounced, it just seems even more embarrassing.



CHAPTER 30

Ishmael knows the first sentence of his speech by heart, though his knees are knocking together and it's very distracting. Hopefully he can make real words come out of his mouth. He says that his team will prove—but then he fumbles and comes out with "the private parts of public figures should be made public." Ishmael can't figure out why Razza looks like he's dying and the girls on the other team are choking on water. They're obviously not taking this seriously.

Because he's so frightened, Ishmael doesn't get his first sentence out right—and his nervousness also means he doesn't know that he misspoke. But Ishmael is doing everything he knows how to conquer his fears and support his team, which is why he's so annoyed when nobody seems to be taking him seriously.



Ishmael shifts his weight before he continues, and something hard jabs him on the inner thigh. He reaches for the front of his shorts, and then realizes that everyone is staring at his groin. Ishmael says he'd like to rebut several of the other team's points. He insists people in the magazine industry would be out of jobs if public figures had privacy. Then, he turns to his cards—which are all written by Scobie and Razza. Bill's cards, with the prepared speech, are on the floor under Ishmael's chair.

It makes things even worse when Ishmael discovers he doesn't have the appropriate cards. Now he doesn't even have the option to just read from the cards and not look at anyone, which further increases the sense that Ishmael is totally alone in this moment.



As Ishmael tries to decide if he'll lose points for crawling under the desk to get his speech, whatever is in his pants starts to slip. Ishmael crosses his legs to try to stop it—but despite his best efforts, something falls out of his pants. As everyone stares, Ishmael tries to pretend that peg person Ringo Starr didn't just fall out of his pants.

Recall that Prue made this peg person. So Ringo's appearance from Ishmael's pant leg isn't just humiliating. It also makes it seem like Ishmael is never going to be able to get out of his sister's shadow—even when he's on stage, doing his own thing.



CHAPTER 31

The next thing Ishmael knows, his body turns to rubber and he's falling toward Kelly Faulkner. He comes to in another room, dizzy and surrounded by concerned people. Razza's mom promises to explain things to Mom and Dad, so when Ishmael gets home, he goes straight to his room. Mom and Dad, of course, later tell Ishmael they're proud of him—and if someone's going to fall out of your pants, it might as well be a Beatle (though Dad would choose any Beatle but Ringo). This doesn't make Ishmael feel better. Prue later suggests it would've been better had Sigmund Freud fallen out of Ishmael's pants, because then it would've been a "Freudian slip." Ishmael doesn't know what this means. He goes to bed and hopes it was all just a dream. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

To everyone but Ishmael, what happened was hilarious. Ringo Starr has the reputation of being the least attractive and least successful Beatle, which makes it seem fitting that he's the one who fell out of Ishmael's pants. Prue, meanwhile, tries to make a sexual joke. A Freudian slip is just misspeaking, but because much of Freud's work was about sex, it's often thought of as having sexual connotations. So having Freud come out of Ishmael's pant leg would be a literal Freudian slip. But not knowing what a Freudian slip is just makes Ishmael feel even worse about the situation.



CHAPTER 32

The next day, during the lunchtime debating meeting, Ishmael wearily tries to explain to Razza about Prue's peg people. Scobie insists they should get on with the debrief. (There's nothing to debrief; after Ishmael fainted, the adjudicators gave the points to the Lourdes School girls.) Scobie insists they should thank Ishmael—because he stepped up, they get to go to the finals. Everyone applauds, and Razza quips that they need to write in the debating handbook: "when all else fails, grope one of the opposition."

There might not be anything major to debrief, but Scobie also seems to want to diminish what happened as much as possible. And this means treating Ishmael's fainting episode as a normal thing that doesn't require special attention. He's trying to do Ishmael a favor here. Razza, though, implies that more happened than just Ishmael fainting.



Ishmael is confused by what Razza means. Scobie, Bill, and Ignatius stare and realize that Ishmael doesn't know what happened. Ishmael doesn't remember anything, aside from trying not to pass out. Razza enthusiastically offers to explain, but Scobie says he should do it. This must be bad. Scobie says that after Ishmael started to fall forward, his arm went out—and his left hand hit Kelly Faulkner. Ishmael asks if he hurt her, but the other boys just smile. Razza starts making puns about breasts and Ishmael looks around, horrified. His life is over: he groped Kelly Faulkner. He puts his face on his desk.

Recall that earlier, Ishmael sarcastically suggested he'd like to meet a girl and get married without ever having to speak to her. He's clearly uncomfortable around potential romantic partners, which makes the revelation that he accidentally groped Kelly even worse for Ishmael. However, note that while Ishmael resents Razza's puns, he does seem to trust and appreciate his friends' attempts to tell him what happened.



Razza continues to dance around and make jokes. Even Ignatius and Bill laugh. Ishmael knows he has no chance with Kelly now. He's not only a "wimp" who faints, but he's a "pervert," too. Finally, Razza collapses on the floor, laughing at his own jokes. Scobie seriously says they need to be mature; they need to cut the "nonsense over what are, after all, just mammary glands." Ishmael peels his face off the desk and asks what he should say to Kelly when he sees her next. Ignatius, Bill, and Razza just stare back blankly. Ishmael turns to Scobie, who says Ishmael could thank her for the "mammary."

For Ishmael, the worst part of this is that Kelly will never want to date him now—he believes that she'll see him as a predator rather than a possible romantic partner. But this setback aside, Ishmael shows how close he's getting with his new friends when he asks them what he's supposed to do now. He wants and values their input. And for his part, Scobie is relaxing and getting better at relating to Razza—his pun is one that will no doubt appeal to Razza.



CHAPTER 33

Once Bill, Ignatius, and Razza get Scobie's joke, they laugh uproariously (and Bill shoots strawberry milk out his nose). Ignatius, Razza, and Bill leave the room, leaving Ishmael with Scobie. Scobie assures Ishmael that he exhibited true St. Daniel's spirit last night by standing up in the first place.

That night, Ishmael tries to forget that he groped Kelly Faulkner, but it's impossible. Maybe he's taking things too seriously and should focus on all that's good in his life. He still has his family and friends, and Barry isn't tormenting him anymore. Things really could be worse—and before long, things get worse.

CHAPTER 34

On the first day after the September holidays, Ishmael has to break the bad news to Ignatius, Razza, and Bill: according to Miss Tarango, Scobie has gone somewhere with his father and won't be back for the debating finals. And for the semifinals, the topic is a secret until that night. They'll be locked in a room with encyclopedias for an hour to prepare. Razza is in disbelief; he insists it took a week to *explain* the last topic to Bill. Then, Ishmael shares the worst news: their opponent is Preston School. Preston School is known for their debating team.

Ignatius says they'll "be drowning in [their] own offal." Razza says they should at least pretend like they can win, but Ignatius argues that they should forfeit. Bill says he doesn't care, and Razza asks Ishmael for his opinion. Ishmael thinks hard before he says that for Scobie's sake, they should at least try. Razza and Ishmael continue to argue with Ignatius. Finally, Ishmael says that if Ignatius agrees to stay on the team and help them prep, Ishmael will speak in his place. Ignatius agrees.

CHAPTER 35

Two weeks later, Ishmael and his teammates are locked in a classroom at Churchill Grammar. Finally, they get their topic and Ishmael reads it aloud: "That science-fiction and fantasy films have little relevance to the problems facing today's world." Ignatius leaps on it and says that fantasy is just a way to escape real problems, but Ishmael reminds him that they're the negative team. They have to prove that fantasy is relevant. Ignatius writes "WE'RE STUFFED" on a sheet of paper.

Since he's Ishmael's closest friend of the group, it falls to Scobie to comfort Ishmael. And to Scobie's credit, he's right: Ishmael did a really hard, scary thing by agreeing to get up and debate. Ishmael is still just too upset to see that he's growing and developing through experiences like this.



Again, bringing up the fact that Barry isn't making his life miserable calls readers' attention to this fact. Ishmael has been willing to grow and try new things without Barry scaring him all the time, which highlights how destructive bullying can be.



Losing Scobie puts the team in a tough spot, as they no longer have their star debater to swoop in and clinch the win. For Ishmael, this also means he won't have Scobie's friendship to rely on—instead, he'll have to let the other boys in more than he has at this point. There are clearly still some issues among the teammates, given Razza's sly insult about Bill's intelligence. The team doesn't fully trust and appreciate each other yet.



This is a huge turning point for Ishmael. Not only does he think the team can and should stay in the competition—he's also willing to get up and try speaking again. Since last time was such a fiasco, this highlights that something has changed for Ishmael. These days, he's feeling more confident in his abilities—and in his teammates' support.



Given that Ignatius doesn't like to think creatively, it's no surprise that he can't come up with a single reason that fantasy is relevant. But fantasy is Bill's area of expertise—so the team might have some hope yet. The fact that no one has caught onto this fact yet shows that the boys are still underestimating Bill and don't see him as a valuable friend and teammate yet.



Bill says that actually, science fiction and fantasy are relevant, since those films talk about the issues the world could experience in the future if they don't deal with the problems they have now. He gives a number of examples, but he stops short when he realizes everyone else is staring at him. And surprisingly, Bill is making sense. Ishmael asks what Bill thinks of Harry Potter, and Bill gives a reasoned argument about how Harry Potter is about standing up to evil and coping with bullying. Ishmael frantically writes everything down and encourages Razza and Ignatius to keep asking Bill questions.

This continues for the next 20 minutes. Ishmael then has enough written to formulate their arguments. But the question now is who's speaking, and in what order. Ignatius says that this isn't his topic. He thinks Ishmael should speak first, then Razza, and then Bill. Razza insists that Bill can't rebut, but Ishmael agrees with Ignatius: he knows the case, Razza is good at going second, and Bill just spent the last 20 minutes rebutting. Razza argues and asks if Bill really understands what's going on here. Bill says he does—this is a bit of a quest, and maybe they're part of a fellowship. Razza puts his hand on Bill's shoulder and says he's in.

CHAPTER 36

A half-hour later, the debating team takes their seats. Ishmael studies the Preston team, who are dressed like undertakers. As Ignatius opens the debate, Ishmael finally remembers the horror of the last debate. But when Ignatius calls up the first member of the Preston team, Ishmael starts to feel better—she's good, but not great, and Ishmael knows he has good rebuttal points. Though Ishmael's stomach is churning, he steps to the front of the room when Ignatius calls his name. In the audience, Mom and Dad are trying unsuccessfully to look casual.

Ishmael looks down at his cards. Razza scribbled on it that Ishmael is “da man” and asks if Elvis is in his underwear. Ishmael starts speaking with a smile. He mumbles and stumbles. It's not brilliant, but he stays conscious, doesn't sexually harass the opposition, and nothing falls out of his shorts. Once the second speakers have both gone, Ishmael realizes that St. Daniel's is doing well. The third speaker for Preston is good, and Razza and Ishmael exchange knowing looks. But Bill is paying close attention, shaking his head, and taking notes.

Finally, Bill has an opportunity to grow and show that he's not a useless, unintelligent warm body on the team. Like the other boys, he has thoughts and feelings—and unlike Ignatius, he's capable of thinking critically and creatively. Noting that Harry Potter is about bullying draws connections between that series and this novel, as bullying is such a huge concern for Ishmael. Ishmael can, Bill suggests, learn some lessons from this fantasy series.



In this moment, the team finally starts to come together and work like a team. Ignatius realizes he's out of his depth, but he doesn't just bow out—he shows that he knows where his teammates' strengths are by offering this speaking order. Ishmael adds his support to Ignatius's by agreeing with him, and also by agreeing to speak first despite his fear of public speaking. Razza is the final holdout, and he's been rude to Bill in the past. But ultimately, Razza chooses to respect Bill and see him as a friend and a teammate.



It seems likely that Ishmael did just need some practice and experience debating. He seems to know his topic way better this time than he did last time, but notice that he's also able to pay attention to what the Preston girl is saying and identify where she's weak. It's also a mark of Ishmael's confidence that he allows Mom and Dad to come watch (recall that the last time Ishmael spoke, he refused to let Dad come so Dad wouldn't have to witness the embarrassment).



Ishmael acknowledges that objectively, he's not great. So it's another mark of his growth and development that he's willing to congratulate himself for, essentially, making it through the debate without encountering major disasters. He's becoming more comfortable with taking pride in small victories, essentially. And though Ishmael and Razza seem ready to accept defeat, Bill is more engaged than he's ever been—he's still fighting.



When Ignatius calls Bill up, Bill gives an impassioned, persuasive speech. He even dumps his index cards, but he continues as though nothing happened. Bill continues past the three-minute and four-minute bells until Razza sneezes for him to stop. Bill stops, concludes his argument, and sits down. The room erupts in applause. Razza nudges Ishmael and nods in Bill's direction. Bill looks different than usual—he's smiling.

Ishmael is changing a lot. But what's more obvious to Ishmael at the moment is the change in Bill, who seems to have suddenly come to life. Finally, Bill got the opportunity to show people that he's intelligent, passionate, and can speak well. This makes him feel better about himself, and it also earns him his teammates' support.



St. Daniel's loses by one point, but nobody on the team cares. They're happy that they almost won. The St. Daniel's team talks with the Preston team and agrees to go and support them at the finals. And weirdly, the Preston kids don't seem all that different. Ishmael's favorite part is when Miss Tarango tells the team that they're her heroes—and that Bill is her "Jedi knight in shining armor." It ends up being one of the best nights of Ishmael's life. It could only be better if Scobie had been there. But the next day, Ishmael doesn't have to wonder anymore where Scobie is, because he gets a letter from him.

It's huge that Ishmael now realizes that the Preston kids aren't so different from him and his teammates. With this, Ishmael starts to acknowledge that he might be more normal than he thinks he is—and that everyone else could be struggling with some of the same things he is. And it's a mark of how good of a friend Ishmael is that what he really loves about this night is that Miss Tarango compliments Bill so strongly. It feels good that Ishmael succeeded—but it feels better to see his friends get recognition and respect.



CHAPTER 37

Scobie's letter is typed. In it, he writes that he's going to miss the debating finals. He explains he has tests every six months to make sure his brain tumor hasn't come back. This most recent time, they found a "shadow" and need to do more tests and scans, but he'll "probably" be fine. Scobie isn't sure when he'll be back to school and asks Ishmael to keep this to himself. In a postscript, Scobie acknowledges that Miss Tarango is right: a word like "probably" can do damage. When he's done reading, Ishmael wonders if it's true that Scobie isn't afraid. What must it feel like to have to face all of this again? Compared to what Scobie is going through, Barry Bagsley seems like "a minor skin irritation."

Scobie's letter makes it clear that his brain tumor isn't totally in the past; it's something that still has the power to turn his life upside down at any time. Noting that "probably" can do damage acknowledges that "probably" leaves some room for the tumor to be something—Scobie's cancer could be back. For Ishmael, this gives him the opportunity to develop empathy and to think more critically about his own situation. Is Barry really worth worrying about when Scobie could be seriously ill? Ishmael seems to conclude that he's not.



CHAPTER 38

A few days after getting Scobie's letter, Miss Tarango announces that Scobie won't be returning to school for "personal" and "family" reasons. This brings Barry suddenly back to life. Barry taunts Ishmael and asks what Ishmael is going to do without Scobie to protect him. Barry asks if the debating "girls" are going to give him a talking-to. Ishmael ignores Barry. He doesn't point out that Scobie, whom Barry calls a "little dork," has kept Barry in line for months. A week later, Barry leaps at the opportunity to make life miserable.

As Ishmael predicted earlier, Barry stops behaving himself once Scobie isn't around to keep him in line. But things have still changed since Scobie first arrived at school—namely, Ishmael now realizes that Barry can be put in his place and kept there if one is willing to stand up to him. Before, Barry seemed all-powerful to Ishmael, but that's no longer the case.



It's a Thursday. At assembly, the members of the debating teams get participation certificates, and Ishmael's team gets special certificates for getting to the semifinals. It's the first certificate Bill has ever gotten. Later in the afternoon, Ishmael notices Barry, Danny, and Doug huddled around a computer in the library. This should raise suspicions.

After school, Ishmael finds Bill at his locker. Bill can't find his debating certificate, which isn't a surprise—Bill loses everything, including the lock for his locker. But Bill notes that nobody would want to steal a certificate with his name on it. He didn't take it to class, and it's not in his bag. Dejected, Bill says he was looking forward to showing his parents.

Ishmael suggests they go check Bill's desk, just in case it got stuck in a book. When Bill lifts his desk, the certificate is pinned to the inside of the lid. Someone glued a picture of Jabba the Hutt to the certificate and changed the wording to read: "Awarded to: William King-size, For: Being a fat turd." Seeing the look on Bill's face, Ishmael rips the certificate out of the desk and says he's taking it to Mr. Barker—he knows Barry did this, and Barry can't get away with it. Bill begs Ishmael not to. It's just a piece of paper. He wads it up and shoves it into his bag, and then he thanks Ishmael for helping him find it.

Ishmael feels terrible. He's terrible at helping people. The boy he helped just got his hat thrown in the creek, the debating team lost twice, and now Bill feels terrible. As Ishmael leaves Bill at the bus stop, he promises himself to do two things. First, he's going to ask Miss Tarango to make Bill a new certificate. Second, he vows to make Barry pay for all the terrible things he's done someday.

CHAPTER 39

Miss Tarango is more than happy to make Bill a new certificate; Ishmael tells her Bill lost his and is too embarrassed to ask for a new one. Then, as Ishmael heads for lunch, Barry asks why Ishmael looks so unhappy. Without thinking, Ishmael snaps that Barry did a "shitty" thing yesterday wrecking Bill's certificate. Barry insists he didn't do it, and he threatens Ishmael if Ishmael tries to accuse him of things. They argue for a minute and then Barry asks the question: if Ishmael is going to make him leave Bill alone. Ishmael knows he can't make Barry stop. Barry isn't afraid of anything.

At first, things seem to be looking up. The school administration recognizes that debating is helping students feel confident and capable—especially students like Bill, who didn't seem to be doing well before. But Barry and his cronies seem poised to undo these gains.



Though Ishmael makes it seem like it wouldn't be a stretch for Bill to have just lost his certificate, the suspicions about Barry and Barry's gang make this seem way less likely. No matter what's happened, though, the effect is the same: Bill doesn't feel as successful and valued as he did hours ago.



Barry is essentially using Bill's love of sci-fi to hurt Bill. Jabba the Hutt is a Star Wars villain whose image has become shorthand for obesity. So the very thing that got Bill this certificate in the first place (his love of sci-fi) is now being used to tear him down. Ishmael knows what, in theory, he should do: go to Mr. Barker and report this instance of bullying. But Bill believes that telling Mr. Barker is just going to make things worse for him—at this point, it seems safer to ignore Barry.



When Ishmael is feeling good, it's not hard for him to give himself credit for trying new things and making progress. But when he's in a mental state like he is now, where he feels terrible about himself and what he can do, Ishmael starts to feel helpless again. Vowing to get back at Barry, though, shows that Ishmael is now more willing to fight back.



In this passage, Ishmael essentially proposes that he can tell Barry that Barry is being mean and rude, and ask Barry to stop, all he wants. But that's not going to stop Barry, since Barry doesn't listen to other people's logic or pleas for mercy. Indeed, Barry asking if Ishmael is going to make him stop tormenting Bill seems like a veiled invitation for Ishmael to get physically violent with him. Barry is trying to make it seem like words can't hurt him.



Ishmael asks what Bill has ever done to Barry. Barry quips that Bill is so fat that it makes him feel ill. Bill makes the building shake, blocks his view in class, and knocks into his desk. Barry concludes by saying that he'll continue to do whatever he wants. As Barry walks away, Ishmael feels like Barry tore one of his limbs off. The feeling doesn't go away when Ishmael gives Bill his new certificate, or when Bill says his parents are getting it framed. Ishmael tries to tell himself things are fine now, but he can't stop thinking of the look on Bill's face when he opened the desk. And these days, Barry seems to be harassing Bill more often—Ishmael unwittingly turned Bill into a bigger target.

Ishmael still feels terrible a week later, when Razza asks if Ishmael will go with him to the debating finals (Ignatius and Bill are busy). Ishmael refuses, but Razza insists on hearing why Ishmael has been looking so down lately. With some convincing, Ishmael tells Razza about the certificate. Razza makes jokes, but then he notes that Barry is a "wanker" and so when Barry calls him things like "Or-arse-i-hole" or "Zit-arse," who cares? Ishmael sees Razza's point, but he doesn't think it's so easy for everyone to brush off Barry's taunts.

Razza asks if Ishmael wants to trash Barry's things and then notes that the Zorzottos have connections in Sicily—he can make Barry disappear. Or they can just leave some horse heads on Barry's doorstep. Ishmael declines the offer. Razza says that in any case, he'll back Ishmael up if Ishmael ever decides to take on Barry. Ishmael knows it's true—Razza will be there for him. He agrees to go to the debating final and asks if this is about debating or the blond girl from Preston. Razza says he's totally just going for the blond girl. He's the Razzman, and he needs a sidekick.

CHAPTER 40

Ishmael spends the night of the debating final trying to contain Razza (who gets very enthusiastic when the Preston blond girl speaks). Preston wins. After their victory, Ishmael stands with Razza while Razza congratulates the Preston team. After a while, Razza manages to pull the blond away. Ishmael finds a quiet spot to drink some soda—and then, Kelly Faulkner walks up and introduces herself. Ishmael is stunned and can barely make words. He just stares at her and remembers that fateful debate with horror.

What Barry says about Bill here is classic (and out of line) bullying behavior. Ishmael, for his part, feels helpless to stop it. And saying that it feels like Barry tore off a limb shows that bullying one student doesn't just hurt that one student—it hurts other people, too. And seeing Barry target Bill seems to bug Ishmael more than it did when he was Barry's favorite target. This shows, first, how close Ishmael is to Bill; he doesn't want to see a close friend hurt. But it also shows how much Ishmael has changed—recall that when Scobie arrived, Ishmael briefly hoped that Scobie would take Barry's attention away from him. Now, such a thought seems inconceivable to Ishmael.



Razza makes an important point: logically, bullies like Barry shouldn't have such an effect on their victims, since Barry is a jerk and not worth trying to impress anyway. But Ishmael knows that bullying isn't always logical like this. It's not easy to be like Razza and acknowledge that this is true—and also make yourself believe it's true and not take the bullies seriously.



Razza's offers might be jokes, but Ishmael understands what Razza is really saying: that he's on Ishmael and Bill's side and will always be there to back up his friends. Knowing this, it's much easier for Ishmael to agree to go to the debating final. After all, part of being a friend is supporting one's friends—and as Razza insists here, he needs a sidekick as he attempts to woo the Preston blond girl.



Ishmael has been feeling pretty good about his night at the finals—but when Kelly arrives, Ishmael can't help but feel self-conscious and out of control. Kelly showing up, though, also gives Ishmael an opportunity to grow and see if perhaps, this time, he can say something reasonable to her.



Kelly asks about the peg person. Ishmael notes that it was Ringo from the Beatles and briefly explains Prue's influential peg person project. Awkwardly, Kelly tells Ishmael he did well stepping in at the last minute. And suddenly, Ishmael realizes Kelly must want an apology for being groped. Ishmael starts to haltingly explain and apologize—and when Kelly catches on, she tries to tell him not to. When they both finally stop, Kelly is blushing hard.

Kelly shakes her head and says she's really here to thank Ishmael for helping her brother, Marty. Ishmael is shocked. Kelly explains that Marty came home and told her all about it, though he couldn't remember Ishmael's name—he could only remember that Barry called Ishmael "Fish-whale" and "sewer." Seeing Ishmael's face, Kelly says boys are charming. She continues that she wanted to thank him after that first debate but didn't get the chance. Fortunately, Ishmael isn't a popular name, so she was able to track him down.

Ishmael says his name is "stupid." Kelly says it's interesting, but Ishmael explains that his name comes from the novel **Moby-Dick**. Ishmael is the narrator. Ishmael then admits that he's never actually read the book. Kelly is shocked; if she was named after a literary character, she'd want to know what the book was all about. Ishmael offers that he's read the first line, "Call me Ishmael." Ishmael says he hates the line—inevitably, there's always someone who blurts it out when they meet him. He'll scream if he hears it again, but Kelly isn't convinced it's all that bad.

Just as Kelly starts to excuse herself, she stops and points behind Ishmael to where Razza is leaping around and making faces at Ishmael. She asks if Ishmael knows him, and Ishmael says he doesn't. As Razza attempts to moonwalk and bumps into people, Ishmael says Razza has a serious brain condition: he doesn't have a brain. Kelly laughs and, in that moment, Ishmael realizes nothing will happen between them. He doesn't have to worry about embarrassing himself, because he's so ordinary compared to her.

Ishmael tells Kelly that Razza is actually a superhero, but he has to pretend to be an "idiot" to hide his real identity. Ishmael is his sidekick. Kelly plays along and pretends to be impressed. When she smiles at Ishmael, her smile is so beautiful that Ishmael thinks it should be illegal. Finally, Kelly says she has to go. Razza swoops in before Kelly can walk away and introduces himself as the Razzman. Kelly says Razza's secret is safe with her and disappears. Ishmael feels like his heart just walked away.

It seems like both Ishmael and Kelly would ideally like to forget that Ishmael never fainted and accidentally groped her—but Ishmael is honest and honorable, so he feels compelled to try and apologize. Seeing Kelly get so embarrassed, though, shows readers (if not Ishmael) that he's not the only teen in the novel who's mortified by past events—he's probably normal in this regard.



For Ishmael, it's a total shock to learn that Marty is Kelly's little brother. Suddenly, Ishmael has a connection to Kelly—and to her, Ishmael looks like a hero who did a selfless, generous thing. But this exchange isn't all good, since Kelly had to track Ishmael down after only hearing Barry's taunts of Ishmael. So this conversation also forces Ishmael to remember Barry's bullying in a space where, normally, he'd feel safe.



Kelly implies that Ishmael is potentially missing out on a whole lot of background info by not sitting down and reading [Moby-Dick](#). Essentially, she plants the idea that perhaps Ishmael's naming wasn't just a big joke for his parents; there might have been more to their decision to name their son Ishmael than the fact that Dad made a whale joke. But Ishmael will never know if he never goes looking for his fictional namesake.



Razza is presumably teasing Ishmael for doing what he told him to do and speaking to Kelly. And perhaps unwittingly on Razza's part, this helps Ishmael come to a realization: he's not going to impress Kelly by trying so hard to look good. He might have better luck if he relaxes and allows himself to act like himself. This is a huge step, as it seems to be the first time Ishmael essentially vows to stop being self-conscious.



As Ishmael relaxes, he finds that, to his surprise, Kelly plays along and seems to enjoy the exchange. Talking to his crush, he's discovering, doesn't have to be so anxiety-inducing. Noting that his heart is walking away with Kelly, though, mirrors what Ishmael said earlier about feeling like Barry tore off a limb. At this point, Ishmael is in pieces, just as he's trying to piece together his identity.



CHAPTER 41

As Razza and Ishmael wait for Razza's mom, Razza insists that because Ishmael "rescued" Marty from Barry, there's no way Ishmael won't snag Kelly. Ishmael insists that this is silly—Kelly just wanted to thank him, and she's just nice. And he has no personality anyway, so he doesn't have a chance. Razza remains unconvinced. When Ishmael asks about the blond, Razza says it's over. They had to end things over "irreconcilable differences," like her not liking him. As Razza's mom pulls up, Razza suggests Ishmael track down Kelly's number and call her.

That night, Ishmael decides that no matter what Razza says, Kelly will stay in his daydreams. And second, Ishmael decides it's time to read **Moby-Dick**. When he asks Dad for his old copy, Dad says that Ishmael is seeking the white whale. That isn't it, though: Ishmael is seeking Ishmael.

CHAPTER 42

Reading **Moby-Dick** isn't at all straightforward. Dad insists that Ishmael can't read the abridged version, so Ishmael finds himself staring down a thousand pages of tiny print—600 pages of the story, and 400 pages of notes on whales and whaling (which he can skip). When Ishmael starts reading, it somehow feels like he's connected to Kelly.

Reading is difficult, but Ishmael eventually gets caught up in the story. By the time he's halfway through, though, he realizes he's nothing like Ishmael (aside from the fact that both Ishmaels have "weird friends"). This is a surprise, because Ishmael expected there to be some similarities between them. Ishmael in the novel doesn't have a Barry Bagsley to torment him. He doesn't faint when he sees whales. He's never embarrassed. He never gropes anyone. Ishmael in the book isn't a loser at all. Perhaps it's because he doesn't have a last name; he can't suffer from Ishmael Leseur's Syndrome without one.

Ishmael does relate to one character in **Moby-Dick**, though: Captain Ahab. Ishmael still has both his legs, but he knows what it feels like to have part of himself ripped away and hate the person who took that part away. Every time Barry taunts Ishmael or torments Bill, Ishmael feels like he's missing something. But is Ishmael like Ahab, craving revenge? Does he really want to hunt Barry down and make him pay? Absolutely.

Judging by how engaged Kelly seemed in conversation with Ishmael earlier, Razza seems to have a point—and Ishmael seems wrong about having no personality. But insisting to Razza that there's no chance with Kelly may also be a way for Ishmael to temper his expectations and guard his heart against possible pain later.



Ishmael makes it clear that he's reading [Moby-Dick](#) because he wants to know who Melville's Ishmael is. This isn't a foray into great American literature—this is a journey into Ishmael's own identity and the things that make him who he is.



Ishmael's sense that he's connecting to Kelly as he reads [Moby-Dick](#) suggests that as Ishmael figures out who he is, it'll also be easier for him to connect with others. Specifically, it seems like it'll make it easier for Ishmael to connect with possible romantic partners.



Ishmael, of course, ignores the fact that his namesake is an adult, while Ishmael is currently in the throes of puberty and is experiencing all the attending indignities. But the fact that Ishmael is surprised that he's nothing like his namesake suggests that Ishmael thought his identity was set out for him—inevitably, he implies, he'd end up a lot like Melville's Ishmael. So finding he's not like Melville's Ishmael is freeing, in a way.



It also seems freeing for Ishmael to discover that he identifies with Ahab. Ishmael implies that Ahab's mad quest for Moby Dick gives him the language he needs to talk about his desire for revenge on Barry. Suddenly, things start to make sense for Ishmael. So his project of reading [Moby-Dick](#) is helping Ishmael figure out who he is—and it's not at all who he thought he was.



This feeling persists, not because of **Moby-Dick** but because Barry's attacks on Bill continue to escalate. Barry leaves pictures of sumo wrestlers, blimps, and weight-loss ads in Bill's desk. He and his friends start grunting whenever Bill passes. What really angers Ishmael is that every time after Barry taunts Bill, Barry looks at Ishmael like he's daring Ishmael to intervene. Ishmael tries to get Bill to tell Mr. Barker, but Bill refuses. Though Bill insists he's fine, he looks more and more desperate and wounded as time goes on.

*The way Ishmael frames this passage shows that he learned an important thing from reading **Moby-Dick**: that the novel is part of his identity and his story, but it's in no way the biggest or most important part. Indeed, what's important to Ishmael right now is that his close friend is being bullied, and the effects of that bullying are becoming more pronounced every day.*



CHAPTER 43

Two weeks before school lets out, things aren't going well. Ishmael is buried in homework and studying for exams, and Mr. Barker tells the debating team that they'll speak at the "end-of-year assembly/mass/prize-giving/speech night/extravaganza thingy." This event always takes place on the Thursday of the last week of school; Friday is the first day of the Christmas holidays. Almost everyone attends (if they don't, they get two weeks of detention once school resumes). The debating team will be reading the prayers of petition, or the requests for world peace and wins for the St. Daniel's sports teams.

Learning he's going to have to speak at this final school event adds insult to injury, as Ishmael already seems overwhelmed with tests and homework. It's a sign of how upset and stressed Ishmael is that he finds this so worrisome, as he got through the last debate just fine and has even spoken intelligently to Kelly Faulkner recently. Also note that Ishmael mentions none of his friends by name here; without debating actually happening, Ishmael may also be feeling more alone.



Ishmael stewes and worries about having to speak in front of people at the event until the day that Bill presents his final speech in Study of Society with Mr. Barker. Students are supposed to "examine the livability of [their] suburb[s]," and most of the talks are boring or unserious. So by the time Bill is up, Mr. Barker is in a terrible mood. Ishmael knows that Bill is taking the assignment seriously. He's put together an extensive PowerPoint, and he's practiced his speech for Ishmael. Ishmael is certain Bill did well.

Given how Mr. Barker has spoken to Bill in the past (recall he told Bill specifically to be productive earlier), it seems as though Bill hasn't put much effort into school before this. Debating, it seems, has helped show Bill that he's capable and can do well in school. It's also significant that Bill has asked Ishmael for help preparing, as this speaks to the strength of the boys' friendship.



Things start out fine as Bill introduces his criteria for assessing livability. But then, on the next slide, there's a photo of an overweight woman in a bikini and a warning to whale-watchers. Mr. Barker asks what Bill is doing in a growl. Bill insists this isn't a joke. But as he clicks through his slides, some of them are the ones he made—and others are weight loss ads, hippopotamuses, and pigs. In the back of the class, Barry, Danny, and Doug stifle their laughter. Finally, Mr. Barker says that Bill has wasted his week of preparation, as usual. When Bill sits down, Ishmael sees Mr. Barker put a D on the marking sheet.

Mr. Barker's anger at Bill is clearly misguided—Barry, Danny, and Doug's laughter heavily implies that they sabotaged his PowerPoint. But the fact that Mr. Barker blames Bill, when others in the class have a track record of bullying and making "jokes" like this, shows how little the adults understand of what's going on at school. Recall that Mr. Barker isn't aware that Barry is currently leading a crusade to torture Bill—because Bill is too afraid to tell an adult he needs help.



When class is over, Ishmael stays in his desk. Razza hangs back, and Ishmael tells him that Barry ruined Bill's speech. Ishmael insists it won't do any good to tell Mr. Barker—all it will do is push Barry to torment Bill even more. Ishmael says he wants to make Barry pay. Razza insists Barry isn't worth it, but Ishmael says *Bill* is worth it. They have to help him. Razza insists he'll take care of it.

Just then, Barry runs back into the classroom to fetch a football and notices Ishmael and Razza. He taunts the "girls" and asks if Razza is still wetting the bed. Then, Barry asks if Ishmael is upset about Bill's "piss-weak presentation," which was so bad because Bill wasn't prepared. Ishmael says someone messed with Bill's speech. When Barry says that Ishmael should find that person and talk to them, Ishmael says he is. Suddenly, the tenor in the room changes. Ishmael tells Barry to leave Bill alone, but Barry tells Ishmael to make him. He then acts like he's going to throw the football in Ishmael's face and says that Ishmael doesn't have a prayer before strutting away.

CHAPTER 44

Ishmael finishes *Moby-Dick* that weekend. When he gives the book back to Dad, Dad insists they have to watch the film adaptation starring Gregory Peck as Ahab. As Ishmael watches Moby Dick destroy the ship and Ahab die, and Ishmael bob on the water, Ishmael knows for sure he's nothing like the fictional Ishmael.

That night, Ishmael has a strange dream. He's at school, and his classroom turns into a swimming pool. Barry has Bill by the hair and is pushing him underwater. Ishmael follows Barry into a dive and tries to choke him—but Barry turns into a fish and slips away. Ishmael can't save Bill, who gets heavier. When Ishmael wakes up, it's past midnight. He lies awake, thinking about all the terrible things Barry has said and done to him. Eventually, Ishmael falls back to sleep—after he figures out how to get back at Barry.

CHAPTER 45

Mom drops Ishmael off on the night of the final school event. Mom, Dad, and Prue can't come, since Mom has a charity dinner and Prue is sick. So Ishmael enters the gym alone. He knows he needs to check in with Miss Tarango, but first, he needs to find Barry. Finally, Ishmael finds Barry and heads his direction. Barry taunts Ishmael when he sees him. Ishmael says that Barry was wrong the other day when he said that Ishmael doesn't have a prayer. He *does* have a prayer. Ishmael puts a piece of paper in Barry's hand and hurries toward Miss Tarango.

Remember that Razza takes a more levelheaded view of Barry's bullying and thinks Barry's victims should just vow to not care. Ishmael, though, doesn't think that's an option anymore—not when Barry is making Bill feel terrible and ruining Bill's grade in this class.



Barry is extremely concerned with looking big, strong, and traditionally masculine, which is why he so regularly calls people girls—he's implying that they're the exact opposite. Ishmael's anger spurs him to confront Barry again. Ishmael seems to be hoping that one of these times, his words will be enough to get Barry to stand down. But when Barry threatens Ishmael verbally and with the football, it shows again that Barry only responds to physicality and violence.



Ishmael saying he's nothing like the fictional Ishmael is ominous, given the scene he's just described: Ahab dies when Moby Dick pulls him under the water, so this implies that Ishmael is now willing to let Barry pull him down if it means making Barry stop.



Though Ishmael's dream might imply that Ishmael won't be successful at either saving Bill or getting the better of Barry, it seems to serve as inspiration for whatever plan Ishmael has thought up. But note that Ishmael is wholly motivated by revenge, and it's unclear at this point whether Ishmael is going to stoop to Barry's level and turn to physical violence to get revenge.



It's fitting that Ishmael is here without his family to support him. However he's going to get back at Barry, the fact that he's trying at all shows that he's coming of age—which is essentially a process of moving away from his parents. This passage also highlights Ishmael's independence when he seeks out Barry without any teachers or other administrators around. Ishmael is acting all on his own.



The next little while goes by in a blur. Rather than listening to the speeches and ceremonies, Ishmael stares at his reading—which isn't the prayer that Mr. Barker helped him write. It's a prayer Ishmael wrote. It reads: "Let us pray that Barry Bagsley can learn to let other people be themselves instead of bullying them and putting them down all the time." Finally, Miss Tarango ushers the debating team onto the stage.

Ishmael looks around the gym and finds Barry in the middle of the room. Barry is obviously furious, but Ishmael is surprised that he himself doesn't care. Ishmael knows he's going to get revenge and there's nothing Barry can do to stop him. Ishmael meets Barry's eyes as Ignatius, then Razza, and then Bill read their readings. Barry mouths for Ishmael not to do it, but then he suddenly seems to panic.

As Ishmael takes the microphone, Barry suddenly doesn't look threatening anymore. Ishmael sees a woman beside Barry put a hand on Barry's knee. She seems to ask Barry if he's okay. This is weird; it's hard to imagine Barry with a mother, let alone someone who looks so normal and nice. And Barry's dad doesn't look drunk and absent. He's wearing a suit and tie and he's smiling. Ishmael says, "Let us pray." It sounds like his voice is coming from somewhere else. He looks down at Barry, who's shaking his head and mouthing "no," "please," and "don't." Barry looks defeated.

Ishmael says, "Let us pray that Barry," but he stops. Barry slumps in his seat, looking beaten. Ishmael recognizes that look—he's worn it, as has little Marty and Bill Kingsley. The gym is silent, waiting for Ishmael to speak. Ishmael feels like he's holding his harpoon, ready to strike, as he starts his prayer several times. But finally, he says that they should pray that the barriers that separate people can be overcome so they can all get along.

CHAPTER 46

Ishmael knows he said he was going to get revenge on Barry Bagsley, but seeing Mrs. Bagsley changed things. Ishmael finds that he can't deal with how embarrassed and hurt she'd be if Ishmael went through with it. And he decides Miss Tarango doesn't deserve to be let down. Everyone who came tonight would have their night ruined. But really, Ishmael can't go through with it because of the look on Barry's face. He knows he put it there, and he doesn't want to be someone who makes people look like that. Even if they're Barry Bagsley.

Finally, Ishmael reveals what he's going to do: read this prayer to the school instead of whatever Mr. Barker wrote with him. This will expose Barry as the cruel bully he is. And notably, Ishmael will also be using his words to get back at Barry, another indicator that language is extremely powerful.



Seeing Barry so upset is satisfying proof for Ishmael that his words are powerful. Barry, he knows, isn't going to make a scene to get Ishmael to not read his prayer—so Ishmael can do whatever he wants. Suddenly, Ishmael finds himself in Barry's position: no one can stop him.



For Ishmael, it's a shock to realize that Barry has parents—parents who seem to be just as nice and involved in their son's life as Mom and Dad are in Ishmael's. Put another way, Ishmael is suddenly confronted with the fact that perhaps Barry isn't so different than he is. But as Ishmael takes the microphone, Barry starts to look even more human—and helpless.



Suddenly, Ishmael realizes what's wrong with this picture. He may be using his words rather than physical violence to get back at Barry. But Ishmael also knows full well that words can hurt—indeed, Barry hurts Ishmael daily by butchering his name. Essentially, by choosing to read a different prayer instead of threatening Barry, Ishmael chooses to not become a bully himself.



In his explanation of why he chose not to humiliate Barry, Ishmael also suggests that he has more people than just himself and Barry to think about. He also discovers in this moment that language is powerful—but part of learning to use language is knowing when to be quiet instead. By being quiet, Ishmael didn't stoop to Barry's level and become a bully himself.



When Ishmael is done speaking, he takes his seat. He knows he made the right choice, but he also knows he didn't help Bill. Barry will go back to torturing people once the Christmas holidays are over. Finally, Brother Jerome releases everyone. Miss Tarango asks Ishmael if he was okay up there. Ishmael insists he was using pauses for dramatic effect. She looks at Ishmael suspiciously but tells him and Razza to have a great holiday. Miss Tarango heads into the crowd.

Ignatius tells Ishmael, Razza, and Bill goodbye and leaves too. Then, Razza turns to Bill and asks what he's doing over the holidays. Gloomily, Bill says he'll hang out at home and maybe go to the movies. At Razza's prodding, he says he has to see *Star Warrior's Quest—The Ultimate Evil*. Razza deems the movie "sweet" and says he'd like to see *The Ultimate Seagull*, or *Star Worrier's Guest*, too. He invites himself and Ishmael to join Bill on Tuesday.

Finally, Bill asks if Razza doesn't hate "space stuff." Acting stunned, Razza says he loves the whole franchise. When Bill suspiciously asks Razza which movie is his favorite, Razza says it's *Star Warrior's Quest—Hot Space Chicks Get Naked*. Bill asks if Razza really hasn't seen the first two movies. He won't understand what's going on in the third if he doesn't see the first two. Ishmael has seen the first two, so Razza says that, obviously, they have to have a *Star Warrior's Quest* marathon this weekend. Razza throws his arm around Bill's shoulder and leads him away so they can plan. Ishmael is shocked when he hears Bill laughing. Apparently, Razza was right: "The Razzman really [does] work in mysterious ways."

CHAPTER 47

Ishmael's smile is huge as he watches Razza and Bill walk away. But it disappears when Barry appears behind him. Barry is clearly angry, but when he says that he knew Ishmael didn't have the guts to go through with the speech, Ishmael doesn't argue—they both know the truth. Ishmael tells Barry to leave Bill alone, but Barry just tells Ishmael that he won't be able to hide next year. Ishmael insists he doesn't want to hide.

At this point, Ishmael suspects that all he's really done is make Barry extremely angry, without actually doing anything to help Bill. But for now, Ishmael seems to think it's worth it if it means he doesn't have to stoop to Barry's level.



Razza is being silly and teasing Bill, but he also seems to expect Bill to find his jokes funny. His teasing is, in this sense, in a totally different register than it's been in the past—he's making fun of the movie titles now, not Bill himself. This shows how much Bill and Razza's relationship has changed in the last few months. Now, they're friends.



Again, Razza is just saying whatever happens to come into his head at any given moment, but it's not barbed or designed to hurt. And when all is said and done, Ishmael has to acknowledge that "The Razzman" works differently than Ishmael thought he did. The implication earlier in the novel was that Razza would help Ishmael get revenge on Barry through physical, possibly violent, means. But now, Ishmael sees that Razza's true power is in being a good friend to Bill. With Razza and Ishmael's support, Bill will have the emotional support he needs to weather Barry's bullying next school year.



Especially when Ishmael says he doesn't have to speak here, since both he and Barry know the truth, it shows that Ishmael hasn't just learned that language is powerful. He's also learned the value in keeping silent—sometimes, he realizes, silence can be just as powerful as speaking. Ishmael's confidence in this passage is palpable, which shows how much Ishmael has changed from the beginning of the novel.



As Ishmael and Barry stand and stare at each other, Mrs. Bagsley appears and kindly greets Ishmael. She makes Barry introduce her to his “friend.” Mrs. Bagsley says Ishmael’s name is lovely and unusual, and Ishmael leans into it. He explains that he’s named after the narrator of **Moby-Dick**. Then, Mrs. Bagsley catches sight of her husband. She says goodbye to Ishmael and suggests he come over sometime during the holidays. Seeing the horrified look on Barry’s face, Ishmael says he’d love to. Once Mrs. Bagsley walks away, Barry points at Ishmael and says, “Next year.” Ishmael says he’ll be there.

Again, it’s clear how much Ishmael has changed when he brings up [Moby-Dick](#) unprompted. He now sees the novel as part of his identity and a cool aside to pull out to impress people. Ishmael also looks like he’s learned to relax and take things in stride: telling Mrs. Bagsley he’d love to come visit shows that Ishmael can roll with the punches and say what he needs to in order to get what he wants out of a situation.



CHAPTER 48

Ishmael desperately needs fresh air. But before he can escape, Mr. Barker asks Ishmael for a word. He says that Scobie’s dad has called, and their concerns ended up not being concerns at all. Ishmael can only say that that’s great. He asks if Scobie will be back in school in January, and Mr. Barker says he will be. Mr. Barker then leaves to go deal with Doug and Danny, who are wrestling. As Ishmael finally heads for the exit, he feels like nothing—not even a platoon of Barry Bagsleys—can make him stop smiling.

Everything is starting to tie up neatly with the news that Scobie is well and will return to school. Ishmael won’t just go back to school next year confident in his ability to speak and protect his friends. He’ll also have all his friends around to protect himself, and he will in turn protect them. This prospect continues to cut into Barry’s image as a terrifying villain.



CHAPTER 49

Ishmael looks around at the crowd one last time, still smiling—but before he can leave the gym, Ignatius barrels into him. Ignatius offers Ishmael an envelope. He doesn’t know what it is; someone at his sister’s school gave it to his sister to pass along to Ishmael. Ignatius runs away, so Ishmael finds a quiet spot and opens the envelope. His heart stops when he sees the name at the bottom.

Ignatius clearly doesn’t care about the contents of or the story behind this letter, which makes his delivery even funnier. But it does seem like a sign that even Ignatius is starting to warm up to his debating teammates that he runs back to give Ishmael the letter.



Kelly Faulkner writes that her friend is having a party for her 15th birthday in February. The friend wants it to be a mixed-gender party, but they don’t know a lot of boys. So Kelly told her about Ishmael and the Razzman and would love it if they could come. She acknowledges that February is a long way away, but she’s going to Hawaii with her family for the holidays and won’t be back until just before the party. She thought Ishmael might like some time to think. Kelly writes her number at the bottom and then writes, “Call me Ishmael!” “Call me” is underlined.

The closing line of Kelly’s letter shows another way that language can be powerful. Kelly reframes the first line of [Moby-Dick](#) to be something that actually has meaning for Ishmael—now, it’s a command for him to pick up the phone and call her, rather than just a narrator asking readers to call him Ishmael. Ishmael’s understanding of how language works and can be powerful is getting more complex.



CHAPTER 50

Ishmael feels unstoppable. He races out of the school, across the football field, and out to the sports fields, where he throws himself in the grass and rolls around. When Ishmael catches his breath, he reads the letter again. The last line leaps out at him. And rather than resenting it, Ishmael lets out “the mother of all wild, barbaric yawps” and feels suddenly whole again. The weirdest thing is that Ishmael feels inexplicably like he’s floating on the ocean, just like a certain someone. He asks the reader to call him Ishmael if they want; after all, as Razza would say, Ishmael is “da man.”

Ishmael is, of course, thrilled because Kelly clearly likes him and wants to hang out again. But Kelly also shows Ishmael that he can learn to love his name and his identity by reframing his relationship to [Moby-Dick](#). Indeed, Ishmael’s observation that he feels like he’s floating on the ocean is a nod to the final scene of [Moby-Dick](#), when Ishmael is the only living person floating on the ocean. Now, Ishmael doesn’t resent [Moby-Dick](#) and how it’s shaped his life. Rather, the novel has helped shape Ishmael into who he is today—just as his friends have.





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