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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Autobiography of a Face by Lucy Grealy

Summary

In her moving memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, award-winning poet Lucy Grealy describes her life as a cancer victim who, at nine years old, has part of her jaw removed. From then on, she endures operation after operation in order to reconstruct her disfigured face, and suffers cruel taunts from classmates and uneasy stares from their parents.

As a child, Lucy finds refuge in the hospital where her face is considered an illness just like any other patient. Her life at the hospital is, ironically, where she feels the best about herself.

Although she maintains a few friends who she had before the surgery, and lives among her four siblings, Lucy is alone. She is torn between wanting to be loved for who she is and wishing desperately and secretly to have a perfect face.

Her search for truth and beauty continues throughout her life -- at college where she finds true friendships and the power of poetry, at graduate school where she discovers her long-awaited sexuality, and later in Britain where she takes advantage of their health system to begin another series of operations. Throughout it all, Grealy tells her story, the story of her face and her heart, with stunning strength and remarkable wit.

Discussion Questions

1. *Autobiography of a Face* has been widely adopted in high school and college curriculums. Do you think this book would be appropriate for younger audiences, to help them understand the feelings of sick and handicapped kids and to teach them the importance of a kind word?
2. As a child, Lucy lives in three worlds: the hospital, her home, and the outside world. How do the people in each of these environments treat her? How does Lucy respond to them?
3. Do you think Lucy tells her readers about the dollhouse (p. 40) to describe her own loneliness? Or do you think Lucy craves a picture perfect place in which to hide and be left alone?
4. The author remembers the first time she grasped the severity of her disease. Do you remember a time in your life where you were surprised to find out something about yourself that everyone else already knew?



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5. After Lucy's second chemotherapy treatment, her mother scolds her: "She went on to explain how disappointed she was that I'd cried even before Dr. Woolf had put the needle into me, that crying was only because of fear, that I shouldn't be afraid... As I made my way downstairs, I resolved to never cry again" (p. 78-79). How does this scene make you feel about Lucy's mom? Do you think, overall, that she is a good mother to Lucy?
6. Her father can't bear to confront her sickness, often leaving her alone during her chemotherapy treatments: "I watched his back as he left and felt relief, because his embarrassment and awkwardness caused me as much pain as they did him. There was no blame in those moments, no regrets, no accusations, not even despair" (p. 84-85). Do you think that Lucy is harder on her mother than she is on her father in this memoir? If so, why do you think that is?
7. "Being different was my cross to bear, but being aware of it was my compensation. When I was younger, before I'd gotten sick, I'd wanted to be special, to be different. Did this then make me the creator of my own situation?" (p. 101). Do you think Lucy, like many children, blames herself for her sickness and, as a result, her disfigurement? Does she believe that she deserves her fate?
8. Young Lucy is tormented by other kids, mostly male: "'That is the ugliest girl I have ever seen.' I knew in my heart that their comments had nothing to do with me, that it was all about them appearing tough and cool to their friends" (p. 124-125). Were you surprised at her level of maturity and reasoning? Or do you see this as an example of a defense mechanism -- distancing herself from the situation in order to hide the hurt?
9. In the hospital bathroom, someone scratched "Be Here Now" into the door. This message has a significant meaning to Lucy later on in the book. Discuss.
10. The struggle between truth and beauty is prevalent throughout Lucy's memoir: "I had put a great deal of effort into accepting that my life would be without love and beauty in order to be comforted by Love and Beauty. Did my eager willingness to grasp the idea of "fixing" my face somehow invalidate all those years of toil?" (p. 157-158). How would you answer Lucy's question?
11. Does Lucy's death change your feelings about this book? How?

Discussion Questions from <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>