



Breathing Underwater by Abbey Lee Nash

★ “Nash’s characters, **flawed and human**, grapple with income inequality, divorce, and disability.”

—*Booklist*, Starred Review

A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

ABOUT THE BOOK

With one word, Tess’s world could be completely undone: **epilepsy**.

Tess lives for swimming: the feel of the pool’s rough edge on her toes, the snap of cold water on her skin, and the push of her limbs ever forward. In the water, she’s truly alive. Until tragedy strikes. And Tess is left navigating a summer of doctor visits, missed swim practices, a newly distant best friend, and a job stuck behind a counter—not sitting high in the lifeguard chair like every season

before. Instead, her spot goes to new guy Charlie. Although his messy hair and laid-back demeanor catch Tess’s attention, this isn’t really the time. She’s got to focus on getting back in the pool—and on getting back to herself.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Tess is addicted to swimming and has earned a spot to compete in Nationals at the end of the summer. How does her dad understand and support this addiction to her sport? Debate whether she is living out her dad’s shattered dreams of playing professional football. Discuss Tess’s mother’s view of her swimming. What makes her change her mind about Tess’s need to swim by the end of the novel?
- Explain what Tess means when she says, “Even a few added seconds can mean shattered dreams” (p. 2). What is Tess’s specialty on the Oakwood Academy swim team? What is Mac’s role on the team? Debate whether Mac is as committed to the sport as Tess.
- Describe Tess and Mac’s friendship. Mac seems different after Seth invited her to the prom. Explain what Tess means when she says, “*Competition is to me as Seth is to Mac*” (p. 5). Characterize Rachel. How does Rachel contribute to the friction between Tess and Mac? Why is Tess jealous of Mac and Rachel’s relationship? Discuss what Tess means when she tells Mac that she is “acting like a Rachel” (p. 63). Mac says, “Can’t let anything hold back mighty Tess Cooper” (p. 67). Why is Mac being so sarcastic to Tess? At what point does Tess confront Mac about their toxic relationship? How does Mac respond?

- Tess, Mac, and Rachel discuss going to a party at the tracks. Tess isn't much of a party person. Rachel proposes that she race Tess underwater in the backyard pool. The winner will decide about the party. Explain what Tess means when she says, "Rachel has dangled the proverbial carrot, and I can already taste it" (p. 5). Tess has a seizure, and EMS is called. How does this scene establish the conflict of the novel?
- Seth King has a party, and most of those in attendance get drunk. Tess and Charlie get Mac home. Why does Mac blame Tess for taking her home? Mac's mother calls Tess's parents because she thinks they have all been drinking. Describe the scene between Tess and her parents when Tess arrives home.
- Discuss the many ways the seizure changes Tess's plans for the summer. Dr. Cappalano, Tess's neurologist, agrees that she can swim, but with safety precautions. What are these requirements? Discuss Tess's reaction to these accommodations.
- How does fear and grief threaten to consume Tess when she is diagnosed with epilepsy? Discuss the following metaphor: "This storm isn't going to pass" (p. 143). What is the storm? Tess's dad thinks that Tess is wallowing in self-pity. How does he encourage her to rethink her decision about quitting the team? Discuss the conversation between Tess and Coach about rejoining the team.
- Describe Charlie, the new lifeguard at the pool. Why does Tess think it difficult to date a "non-athletic" type? At what point does she learn that Charlie had been an athlete? Debate whether he has given up on sports altogether. How does he support Tess in her sport? Charlie says, "The fact that you're a swimmer is the least interesting thing about you" (p. 109). What are the interesting things that Charlie notes about Tess? Why does Tess break up with Charlie? What things change for them by the end of the novel?
- Tess's sister, Ali, has moved home for a while. Describe Ali through Tess's eyes. Discuss the following simile: "My mom and sister were like angry bees, swarming around each other and stinging anyone that got in their way" (p. 65). How does this characterize Ali's relationship with her mom? Debate whether Ali is self-centered and irresponsible. How does this change after Tess has a second seizure?
- Tess has been offered a swimming scholarship to Northern Hills University. Tess sees Coach Andrews from Northern Hills and Coach Tom Kirk from Center Valley at Nationals. Contrast their coaching styles. Dr. Cappalano told Tess that she may need to readjust her goals. Which scholarship do you think Tess is most likely to accept? Debate whether this is giving up on her dreams or readjusting her goals.

ABOUT THE CREATOR



Abbey Lee Nash holds an MA in English from Arcadia University. She lives with her husband and two daughters outside of Philadelphia, where she works as a senior marketing writer in the healthcare industry. A former writing teacher, she enjoys leading creative writing workshops, and has presented at SCBWI events, the National Council of Teachers of English, as well as schools and universities. When she's not writing, or talking about writing, you can find her reading, spending time with her family, or walking her highly opinionated Australian Shepherd. *Breathing Underwater* is her second novel. You can learn more about her work at AbbeyNash.com.