

READING NOTES

jaclyn  
moriarty



gravity  
is the  
thing

## Blurb

Abigail Sorensen has spent her life trying to unwrap the events of 1990.

It was the year she started receiving random chapters from a self-help book called *The Guidebook* in the post.

It was also the year Robert, her brother, disappeared on the eve of her sixteenth birthday.

She believes the absurdity of *The Guidebook* and the mystery of her brother's disappearance must be connected.

Now 35, owner of the Happiness Café and mother of four-year-old Oscar, Abigail has been invited to learn the truth at an all-expenses-paid retreat.

What she finds will be unexpected, life-affirming and heartbreaking.

**A story with heart, warmth and wisdom.**

‘Astonishingly wonderful and magical and moving and uplifting and DIFFERENT.’

**Marian Keyes**

‘A brilliant, beautiful, hilarious, heartbreaking, extraordinary book. I say this without bias, only awe.’

**Liane Moriarty**

‘Jaclyn Moriarty writes with such intimacy and charm, it's like talking to your dream best friend. But then she weaves a story so compelling, and heartbreaking, and profound, it could only have come from an extraordinary writer.’

**Laura Bloom**

‘A thoughtful, beautifully written, truly original, and often hilarious meditation on loss, hope, the self-help industry, and the difficulties of navigating life on earth.’

**Emily St. John Mandel**

## Author biography

Jaclyn Moriarty is the prize-winning and bestselling author of novels for adults, children and young adults, including the ‘Ashbury-Brookfield’ books, The Colours of Madeleine trilogy, and the Kingdoms and Empires books. Jaclyn grew up in Sydney, lived in the US, England and Canada, and now lives in Sydney again.

## Plot and structure

*Gravity is the Thing* spans twenty years of Abigail Sorensen's life and is a dual narrative that shifts between the past – in 'reflections' on 1990, 2000 and 2005 – and present – in 2010.

In the present, Abigail is 35, owner of the Happiness Café and mother of four-year-old Oscar. She's been receiving random chapters from a self-help book called *The Guidebook* that offers advice on how to live her life since she was fifteen. Authors Rufus and Isabelle instruct Abi to write a 'reflection' and post it to them every year.

Now she been invited to learn the truth behind *The Guidebook* at an all-expenses-paid retreat on an island in Bass Strait. The retreat is hosted by Wilbur, Rufus and Isabelle's son, and, by the end of a series of activities, he chooses Abi and a handful of others, to know the truth: if they followed *The Guidebook*, they will be able to fly. When she returns to everyday life, Wilbur asks her to attend his flight classes once a week as it was his parents' dying wish that he continued their work. She goes to the session with five other people, including Niall, who Abi was attracted to at the retreat.

Abi's 1990 reflection reveals that on the eve of her sixteenth birthday her brother Robert, who had multiple sclerosis, disappeared without a trace. She believes *The Guidebook* and Robert's mysterious disappearance must be linked.

In Abi's 2000 reflection we see how Abi's life unfolded after Robert went missing. Her parents divorced, Abi became a lawyer to help fight for justice for missing peoples' families and she met her husband Finnegan. In the first lead she's had in ten years, Abi discovers that Robert had taken their neighbour's passport. She tracks Robert to London then the trail goes cold. By the time Abi writes her 2005 reflection, she's living in Montreal with Finnegan and her life turns upside down when she discovers that he's cheating on her. She then falls pregnant after a one-night stand.

In the present, Niall and Abi start a relationship but, when Oscar is hospitalised after swallowing a battery, it is Wilbur to whom she turns for support.

Wilbur realises that Robert was also sent *The Guidebook* and, when they look at Robert's rejection letter to Isabelle and Rufus, they discover that Robert had flown to Helsinki, Finland. Further investigations reveal he died after falling through the ice of a lake.

Abi is finally able to confront her grief, to draw some conclusions about what it all means, and take the next steps in her life.

## The non-linear technique

### QUESTION 1

*Gravity is the Thing* is a dual narrative that tells Abi's life in two different points in time; one in the present and one that details Abi's life in 1990, 2000 and 2005. Discuss the effectiveness of this non-linear technique and how Abi's character unfolds – how it unpicks the events that shape her life in the past and affect her circumstances in the present.

## Metafiction

### QUESTION 2

*'But where is the rule that says a chapter must be ten to twelve pages? Nowhere.'* (p. 21)

*'The screenwriting course was full of diagrams and arcs, rules, bullet points and three-part structures. According to the Rule of Three, things that come in threes are inherently funnier, more satisfying, more effective. All this makes me want to break the rules, crack the structure, collect things into seven parts, or two, or twenty-eight.'* (p. 265)

Discuss what 'rules' of writing or structure Jaclyn Moriarty has subverted in *Gravity is the Thing* and whether there are any metafiction elements in the novel.

## Foreshadowing

### QUESTION 3

*'Robert himself assumed his (excellent) Italian accent, said that his name was Roberto, that he was from Montepulciano, Italy, where they race barrels on the last Sunday in August, and that he felt most imaginative when he was standing on the ice.'* (p. 75)

*'... she's got an older brother named Andrew, who is useful in that he is nineteen. So Carly sometimes steals his licence from his wallet and lets Robert borrow it for ID.'* (p. 78)

Jaclyn Moriarty foreshadows many events in *Gravity is the Thing*. Discuss this technique and how it is effectively woven throughout the story. What examples can be found throughout the novel?

### QUESTION 4

*"'It's those little round batteries," she said at one point. "The button batteries. Kids swallow them. They stick them up their noses. They'll burn a kid's oesophagus irreparably. Right away, they start burning through, those lithium batteries. If we don't get to them in time, the kid will die. Or never talk again. Never breathe on their own again."'* (p. 51)

What does foreshadowing events in a novel say about fate?

## Flight School

*'There are five units. First, Meditation. Open your mind to flight. Second, Flight Immersion. Imbue your consciousness with the idea of flight. Third, Sensory Development. Flight is a sense, as I've mentioned. It lies just beyond your other senses. Fourth, Practical Flight. The physical aspects of flying. Once we have completed those four units we move to the fifth and final unit: Emotional Flight. By that point, your sense of flight should positively blaze.'* (p. 161)

### QUESTION 5

Discuss the structure and each of the five units in Flight School and why each of the units might make sense in learning to fly? How does the author create a believable scenario in which each of these units could be achievable to help someone fly?

## Characters and relationships

### QUESTION 6

*"But listen," Wilbur repeated, his voice suddenly urgent, or pleading. "Only certain among you will be chosen to hear the truth . . ."* (p. 29)

*"Playing it straight doesn't mean we have to go along with it. It means we don't make fun of Wilbur's parents. I'm being exactly who I would be if they were saying these things. I'd question everything."* (p. 159)

Discuss each of the characters in Flight School: Niall, Antony, Pete, Frangipani and Nicole. What does Wilbur see in each of the characters to make him believe they need Flight School? Why does each of them suspend their disbelief and participate?

### QUESTION 7

*'I was puzzling out the concept of love. How did you pin it down?'* (p. 355)

Discuss Abi's varying relationships with Finnegan, Niall and Wilbur, and what each relationship says about 'love'. What characteristics do each of these relationships share or not share? In the final chapter, it is implied that Abi ends up with Wilbur, who has always remained on the periphery of the story. What does this say about relationships and love? What do you think Wilbur represents to Abi?

### QUESTION 8

*'I lay still in the summer light and listened, and there was silence, but completely different. Now it was misty and calming, like yoga. Because I thought it translated into Robert being fine. If something had happened to him, I reasoned, there'd be noise.'* (pp. 118–119)

*'After a moment he added: "That must be what it's like to have a brother missing." He turned to me. Opened a bag of pretzels. "Getting on with life but life's not moving. Is that what it's like?'"* (p. 225)

Discuss these quotes in relation to Robert's disappearance. Why are they accurate? How has Robert's disappearance shaped Abi? How does this affect her observations of the world?

## Themes

### Flight School

*'Assuming you've been reading The Guidebook, and you've carried out most of its tasks and exercises, you can fly now. All of you can fly.'* (p. 59)

*'Some of my favourite words: Windcheater. Skyscraper. Wolkenkratzer. Wolkenkratzer is German. It means skyscraper but, literally, it means cloud-scratcher. Cheating the wind, scraping the sky, scratching the clouds.'* (p. 73)

*'For a moment, I believed. Right into the centre of my heart, into my centre, came a thought that took my breath: It's true that we can fly.'* (p. 318)

#### QUESTION 9

Flight is the dominant metaphor throughout *Gravity is the Thing*. How are the characters learning to fly both literally and figuratively? Discuss how Jaclyn Moriarty weaves this metaphor throughout the entire novel, before and after Abi understands the truth about *The Guidebook*.

#### QUESTION 10

Further to the flight metaphor, how does *Gravity is the Thing* explore how the concepts of thrust, lift, gravity and drag (pp. 186–187) are useful metaphors for life?

### Causation versus coincidence

#### QUESTION 11

*'But for me, there were only two answers to the question. (a) I was Robert's sister, which is to say I was Robert's best friend, the other half of Robert, so close to Robert that he'd never ever leave without telling me exactly where he was going. (b) I was Robert's sister, but it turned out we were not all that close, I was not all that important, I was irrelevant to him, he was indifferent to me, maybe even hated me a little, and so he'd run away without a word. If (a) was true, Robert must be dead. If (b) was true, my life had been a lie.'*  
(pp. 130–131)

*'There is no such thing as cause and effect, Hume said. We can never know that one thing caused another. All we know is that this happened and then that: one thing followed another. You cannot experience the act of causation and thus you cannot know that it took place.'*  
(pp. 262)

Causation is one event causing another event. Coincidence explains two events that are seemingly linked without causal connection. How does *Gravity is the Thing* explore and contrast the ideas of causation and coincidence? When does something stop being causation and start being a coincidence? Discuss examples of both causation and coincidence in the novel and how they affect the storyline.

## The Guidebook and self-help

### QUESTION 12

*'Enclosed is Chapter 1 of The Guidebook. One day, this book will change the world. In the meantime, it will change your life.'* (p. 20)

*'Sweet antelope, dear reader, what were you doing in the self-help section of your bookstore! Are you a fool or a baboon? Which? Do you think that the answer can be found in self-help?'* (p. 25)

How does *Gravity is the Thing* compare, contrast and critique popular self-help books such as *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield or *I'm OK—You're OK* by Thomas Anthony Harris. Why do these types of books sell millions of copies? What is so appealing about self-help books and why do people look to them for answers? How do these books differ from the advice offered by the great philosophers throughout the ages? Is *The Guidebook* different to these books? Why?

## Parenting

### QUESTION 13

*'She was marking out the coordinates of her grandmothering for me, and they were excellent. They always are. From free-range mother to mindful grandma. Each time she takes care of Oscar, I think I should model my parenting on her. But then I take him back and return to normal life . . .'* (p. 13)

*'I read it again and realised that my parents had forgotten to give us the illusion of freedom: they had given us actual freedom.'* (p. 146)

Abi is a single parent and calls herself a 'free-range mother'. Abi's parents believe they were free-range parents too. What does *Gravity is the Thing* say about different forms of parenting? Is there a right or wrong answer?

## The pursuit of happiness

### QUESTION 14

*'Happiness is . . .'* (p. 307)

*'Eventually I opened my eyes to the day: Choose happiness! I breathed in the happy, and breathed out the sad.'* (p. 190)

Discuss how *Gravity is the Thing* explores what it means to be happy and why humans pursue happiness. Discuss happiness as a 'zeitgeist'. What does happiness mean to Abi? What does happiness mean to you?

## Guilt

### QUESTION 15

*'But, in fact, my brother, my husband, my baby—it's my fault. It has always been my fault.'* (p. 352)

Guilt is a powerful and overwhelming emotion. Discuss how guilt plays an important role in Abi's life and inhibits her ability to move forward. Why does Abi feel so intensely guilty? Why does she believe everything is her fault? How does Abi express her guilt?

## Grief

### QUESTION 16

*'Who is she to be telling you the right way to grieve! You can grieve however you like, Wilbur! There's no right way!'* (p. 396)

*'And now I was howling. Standing on the corner of Blues Point Road and Lavender Street, wailing.'* (p. 451)

Many characters in *Gravity is the Thing* are grieving. Wilbur is grieving the loss of his parents, Abi and her parents are grieving the loss of Robert and Niall is grieving the loss of his thirteen-year relationship. Abi says there's no right way to grieve. What does this say about both the universality and individuality of grief?



## Writing style

‘Jaclyn Moriarty writes with such intimacy and charm’

Laura Bloom

*Gravity is the Thing* is written in a non-linear, first-person perspective, spanning more than twenty years of Abigail Sorensen’s life. We begin in Abi’s present allowing the reader to dive into her mind to see and feel everything that she’s experiencing. This is then broken up by her ‘reflections’ – written responses to *The Guidebook* – that flash back to 1990, when Robert goes missing; 2000, when she meets Finn; and 2005, detailing her time with Finn in Montreal.

### QUESTION 17

Various authors have described *Gravity is the Thing* as ‘whimsical’, ‘magical’ and ‘original’. What elements of Jaclyn Moriarty’s writing style support these adjectives? What other adjectives would you use to describe Jaclyn’s writing style or Abi’s voice, and why?

### Voice

### QUESTION 18

*‘I hoped I’d be one of the ones doing the sleeping together and, in particular, I hoped I’d sleep with the redheaded guy.’* (p. 18)

*‘So now you’re thinking: Can this girl talk about anything else besides SEX?!’* (p. 72)

Discuss how Abi’s first-person voice both evolves and remains the same in the present story and her written reflections from 1990, 2000 and 2005. How does Jaclyn achieve this consistency of voice throughout Abi’s changing ages and surroundings? What are the quirks that make Abi’s voice unique?