

One of the fascinating aspects of this graphic memoir is that it allows the reader to see different points of view in dealing with a terrible illness like ALS. How does the diagnosis affect Harvey, Marissa, and each of the three boys? How does each one deal with the dramatic shifts in their lives?

One of the themes throughout the book is that we're told by society in the form of movies, books, and social expectations that serious disease is supposed to make us nobler, better people. That wasn't true in the very real experience of this family. How do you think you would react to a diagnosis of terminal illness? How would you want to react?

Another theme of the book is denial – denial of weakness, illness, and death. Do you think denial is helpful or harmful when dealing with very ugly realities? Why?

Guilt is yet another theme, perhaps an inevitable result of being immersed in such a stressful situation where small decisions can have major repercussions. How does Harvey show his sense of guilt? How does Marissa? How do each of the boys? Is guilt ever helpful or does it simply mask other issues? How does survivor guilt fit into the reactions of the family and friends?

Insurance and medical hassles is a lightly-woven theme throughout the story. In fact, Harvey was lucky to have very good insurance. What issues would he have faced without it? What problems did he have despite having such premium insurance?

We will all deal with death and grief at some point in our lives. Do you see ritual as helpful? How does Jewish ritual support Harvey? How does it support Marissa and the boys? How can ritual give meaning to events that seem horribly meaningless?

Dealing with catastrophic illness feels isolating, cut off from normal life. Friends and acquaintances often don't know what to say, how to be helpful. What are simple concrete ways to reach out to those in need? What small acts of kindness made a difference for Marissa and her family? Make a list of things you could say or do to help someone suffering from a devastating disease.

Harvey didn't want his colleagues at the University to know he had ALS. The boys didn't want their friends or teachers to know about the diagnosis. Why do you think they felt that way? Is there a stigma to having a terminal illness in one's family? Is there a social awkwardness? How can we remove that stigma or at least ease it?

Is there a point when doctors should stop trying to cure and focus instead on palliative care? Who decides when such a point is reached – the doctor, the patient, the caregiver? Can we work towards a “good” death? What would a good death look like?

Women often bear the brunt of caregiving – for children, aging parents, and for sick spouses. Do you think women are “natural” caregivers and that this role suits them? Marissa rebels against that role, as much as she loves Harvey. Some reviews have called her behavior “selfish.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Would her behavior be judged differently if she were a man? How?

Swimming is a motif/metaphor throughout the book. What did swimming mean to you as you saw it in Marissa's life? Why was it so important to her? Was she selfish and/or irresponsible to swim every

morning?

A lot of the story in *Last Things* is told through the images, through expressive drawings of the characters. How does the art help deepen the story? How does it make it easier to experience such a terribly sad story? Does the art add any light moments to help break up the difficult moments? How?

What was your understanding of ALS before you read the book? Afterwards? What kind of journey did the book take you on?