

What Happened written by Peter Johnson

Ages: 13 and up

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“An evocative, beautifully written voyage into the heart of adolescent darkness, as clear and sudden as a bullet to the brain.”

—**Rodman Philbrick, author of *Freak the Mighty, The Last Book in the Universe, and The Young Man and the Sea.***

“Peter Johnson, an award-winning poet, writes with unusual grace and tenderness about kids who are troubled—and occasionally baffled—by the necessity of moral choice when their lives seem to be nothing but a “combination of catastrophes and dumb decisions.” The voice that Johnson has given this boy—also a poet—is breathtakingly good, each word conspiring with every other word to create an irresistibly seductive tone that is a haunting combination of sadness and fragile hope. Fans of Robert Cormier will welcome this similarly satisfying invitation to reflect on religion, reality, and reasons for getting out of bed in the morning.

—**Booklist, * Starred Review by Michael Cart**

“This taut, nonlinear tale chronicles the narrator's experience when the car he and

his brother are riding in hits a bicyclist during a January snowstorm. Johnson deftly sets up the story's fragmented nature by allowing his narrator to announce it at the start (“If my story seems erratic it's because I think that way”), yet the story is actually pretty representative of the way experiences can fly by in the face of a life-changing incident. This is therefore a drama that will provoke ethical and philosophical questioning not only about the central crisis but about the life paths that brought these boys to this moment in the first place.

— **The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books**

About this Guide

The following material is designed to enhance your reading of *What Happened*. Feel free to adapt activities and suggestions to suit your needs and interests.

About the Book

I don't know what the truth is, or who needs to hear it, but I know what happened, and if my story seems erratic it's because I think that way, because it's not as if one event happens, then another, everything following, like a parade, in a logical progression leading to a happy ending because there haven't been many happy endings in my life or Kyle's, or happy beginnings or middles either, just events needing to be pieced together, like a jigsaw puzzle, and if we can do that, then maybe we can make sense of those events and live with what

we did or what others said we did. So listen: here's where my story begins, here's where my story ends.

An unnamed sixteen-year-old is the hero of this impressionistic and fragmented novel. His account of events begins on a snowy winter evening after his brother Kyle brawls with Duane over the beautiful Emily. The two high school basketball stars make apparent amends and Duane offers the brothers a ride home from this late-night party. Drunk, high, and still fuming at Kyle, Duane drives recklessly to scare his passengers. In his mindlessness, Duane hits someone on the road, then leaves Kyle, the narrator, and the body of the victim to freeze while he speeds away in his car.

After the night has passed, the narrator and Kyle must face Duane's powerful father, who hopes to intimidate the brothers into silence. The man hated the boys' father when the two adults were in high school, and he hates Kyle for dating his daughter, Emily. As tension builds, the brothers learn that the abandonment by their father after their mother died is only the tip of their father's mysterious history and only a sliver of *What Happened*.

About the Author

Peter Johnson was born and raised in Buffalo, New York, during a time when the city had a good football team. He came from a working-class family but attended a private Catholic high school because he was a good athlete and fairly intelligent. After high school he traveled around the country working a number of different construction jobs, then finally went to college, which he didn't leave

until he received his Ph.D. in English. He currently teaches English at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island where he lives with his wife and two sons. He is an award winning poet, and his second book of poems, *Miracles & Mortifications*, received the 2001 James Laughlin Award from The Academy of American Poets as the best second book of poems published that year. He also has received a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

According to Peter, he first became interested in storytelling from reading Greek and Roman mythology, and he also grew up in a family of Irish storytellers. "My grandfather, father, and uncles told so many stories over and over again, often changing them, that very often none of us knew whether those stories were true or false. Consequently, I became just as interested in how a story was told as in what it was about. I came to see that we define ourselves from the stories we tell about ourselves, just as the narrator of *What Happens* does."

Peter says that he wants to write books about teenagers coming to grips with the often crazy world they inhabit. "I think teenagers are a lot smarter than we give them credit for and that, besides looking for entertainment, many of them want to think deeply about their lives. I hope my books make them talk to each other about what's important to them."

His favorite books (at least for this week) are:

Classics:

Candide by Voltaire,
Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut,
Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad

Contemporary YA novels:

Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt
Small Avalanches and Other Stories by Joyce Carol Oates.
Many Stones and *What Jamie Saw* by Carolyn Coman
Carver by Marilyn Nelson
Weetzie Bat by Francesca Lia Block

His hobbies are: swimming, golf, and hanging out with his sons (ages 22 and 4).

Advice? Finish whatever you're doing. All of a sudden you look behind you and you've accomplished something.

Home page:
www.providence.edu/English/Faculty/Peter+Johnson.htm

Pre-writing (to be done in class or at home)

One way the narrator makes sense of his life is by collecting quotations from such sources as books, songs, and newspapers. Bring a quotation to class that is important to you. How has finding this quotation changed your life?

What contemporary song does *What Happened* remind you of?

The narrator has his tower to go to when he needs to feel safe. Where do you go? Why?

There are a number of symbols in *What Happened*, like the tower, the snow globe, and the apple paperweight. If you were the narrator of your own personal

story, what object would you choose to symbolize a crucial event in your life?

The opening of the novel suggests that the narrator views reality differently from most people. Write a short opening to your life story, which will prepare the reader for how you plan to tell it. The narrator compares his life to a jigsaw puzzle. What metaphor would you use?

Without Rondo as a friend, the narrator's life would be much harder. Has there ever been a time in your life where one friend has helped you to make sense of your life?

If you were making a movie of *What Happened*, what actors would you hire to play the parts of the narrator, Kyle, Duane, and Emily?

Questions for Comprehension

Part I

Why does the narrator's father leave him and his brother?

How do the narrator and the other boys act differently to the accident?

Why does the narrator go to his tower?

Part II

Why does the narrator say that he "stopped believing in anything for a while"?

Where did the narrator meet Rondo and why does he say they are friends?

Why do the boys decide to go see Emily's father?

Part III

Why does Kyle get mad when he and the narrator are at Emily's house?

What does the narrator's mother tell him at the cemetery?

Why does the narrator follow the girl on the bus?

Part IV

Why do the narrator, Kyle, and Emily visit the Catholic church, and what happens there?

What do Kyle and the narrator discuss at the hospital where Kyle is waiting for Austin Clark to die or get better?

What information does the narrator discover about his parents from his aunt?

Part V

What do the narrator and Duane's mother talk about when she picks him up?

Where do the narrator and Kyle go after Kyle knocks out Duane?

What is the last image we are left with in the novel?

Questions for Discussion

Part I

How does the first part of the novel resemble that "jigsaw puzzle" the narrator mentions in the opening of *What Happened*?

Although the narrator's mother is dead before the novel even begins, how could you argue that she is the most important character in the novel?

Look up the concept of the Great Chain of Being on Wikipedia. Describe it in your own words and explain why the concept doesn't work for the narrator anymore. Does it make sense to you?

Part II

A quotation from Sparks' song "Angst in My Pants" opens the second part of *What Happened*. Look up the complete lyrics and explain what the song has to do with the narrator's life.

On the surface Rondo could be considered a bit of a loser, so why does the narrator choose Rondo to be his best friend? What positive qualities does Rondo offer, and why is he an important character in the novel?

Part III

In Part III we catch a glimpse of the narrator's mother doing a gravestone rubbing. Read some background on gravestone rubbings (<http://www.justcallbob.com/grave.htm>). How does the gravestone in the novel relate to any of the themes or action?

Out of all the symbols in the book (the snow globe, the paperweight, the tower, and maybe you can think of others), which one would you choose to place on the cover of the book? Are there any specific directions you would give for how you would want this picture drawn?

Part IV

By Part IV of the novel, it's clear that the narrator plans to write a different ending for each part. What does he accomplish by doing this?

Rondo compares the narrator's story to "some big goddamn Greek tragedy." What does he mean by "Greek tragedy," and why is his comparison accurate? Look up tragedy on Wikipedia.

Each part of the book opens with a quotation and ends with a poem. Do you see any connection between the quotations and poems of each part?

Part V

In Part V the narrator imagines a few scenarios for what his father might have done after he leaves his two sons. Which scenario do you think makes the most sense? Can you think of a different one?

The novel ends with an image of "tiny sailboats just now quivering on the surface of the lake, bobbing up and down like seagulls, yet never going under." How do these sailboats resemble the lives of the narrator, Kyle, and Emily?

The last two words of the book are "Believe. Believe." Who says those words first and what precisely does the narrator come to believe in at the end of the novel?

Ideas for Further Research (More difficult)

On Wikipedia or other search engines look up the following terms and explain how they relate to the novel:

Existentialism

Bildungsromans or coming-of-age novel

Impressionism as a way of telling a story

Prose poetry