



Breathing Underwater

By Alex Flinn
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Introduction

Intelligent, popular, handsome, and wealthy, sixteen-year-old Nick Andreas is pretty much perfect — on the outside, at least. What no one knows — not even his best friend — is the terror that Nick faces every time he is alone with his father. Then he and Caitlin fall in love, and Nick thinks his problems are over. Caitlin is the one person who he can confide in. But when things start to spiral out of control, Nick must face the fact that he's gotten more from his father than green eyes and money.

Questions for Discussion

1. At the beginning of the book, Nick thinks of his abuse of Caitlin: "It was a slap ... one slap when she pushed me way too far. I never beat her up, would never really hurt her." Does Nick believe this? Why or why not?
2. Why does Judge Lehman make Nick keep a journal in addition to discussing the incidents in Mario's class? Would simply keeping the journal (or simply attending class) yield the same result?
3. Comparing himself to Tom, Nick says Tom is a great guy, "But we'd all be great guys if we had his life." How do a person's circumstances affect the type of person they are? Apply this to the characters in the book.
4. At the beginning of the story, Tom has abandoned his longstanding friendship with Nick because of Nick's conduct toward Caitlin. Was this right? What, if any, are our obligations to our friends?
5. Conversely, should Tom have reacted sooner to Nick's conduct? What is someone's obligation to stop conduct which endangers others? Have you ever had a friend who behaved in an unacceptable way? What, if anything, did you do?
6. Why did Nick wish to conceal his abuse at his father's hands? Would it have been to his benefit to tell someone? How could it have been to his detriment?
7. Nick says to Caitlin, "We're two of a kind," and she agrees. How are Nick and Caitlin similar? How are they different?
8. How are our perceptions of other characters in the book (Saint, Elsa, and Leo, particularly) colored by Nick's opinions? If the book was narrated by Caitlin, how would our opinions be different? What if it was narrated by Elsa?
9. Does Caitlin have any qualities which make her an easy target for someone like Nick? Conversely, are there qualities which make it easier for her to leave Nick (and stay away) in the end.
10. Would Nick have gone as far as Leo without help? Why or why not?
11. In what ways are the guys in Mario's Family Violence Class different from one another? In what ways are they the same? How would Nick's friendship with these guys differ from his friendship with Tom.
12. At the end of the book, Nick tells Caitlin, "I loved you so much" and she responds, "I can't believe that anymore." Did Nick truly love Caitlin? Why or why not? Does she really not believe him? What makes you think so or not think so?
13. Nick says of his father's gift of an expensive car, "It's the best he can do." What does he mean by this? Do you think Nick will ever have a relationship with his father? Is there anything Nick could do to improve the relationship? Should he? Should Caitlin's decision about her father be any different than Nick's?
14. In the final scene, Tom says, "I want things like they used to be" and Nick responds, "They aren't." In what ways do you think things will be different for Nick from now on? Would Nick, given a choice, want things "like they used to be" when he was with Caitlin?
15. What does the title phrase Breathing Underwater mean?

About the author

When Alex Flinn was five, her mother informed her that she would be "an author" when she grew up. Never one to follow instructions, Alex studied theater and opera and became a lawyer before finally writing her first novel, *Breathing Underwater*. Alex lives in Miami with her husband, Gene, and their daughters, Katie and Meredith.