



## **Cellular**

Ellen Schwartz

Reading level: 2.3

978-1-55469-296-5 PB

978-1-55469-297-2 LIB

AR Quiz # 140880

### **Book Summary**

As captain of the basketball team and dating one of the prettiest girls in school, Brendan had everything going for him his senior year—until he started noticing that something was not quite right. Brendan rationalized the lethargy, chills, loss of appetite and weight, pains in his joints and weird bruises; then when it started affecting his physical relationship with Cassie, his girlfriend, Brendan finally relented to his mother’s pleas that he go to the doctor. But Brendan is not prepared for the diagnosis—leukemia—or the harrowing treatments that he must endure in his effort to fight the disease. His family, his teammates and coach—even his girlfriend—don’t seem to be able to reach Brendan. He’s angry, resentful and scared. Only when he meets Lark, a fragile young cancer patient with even more frightening prospects, does he find someone with whom he can relate. Through Lark’s gentle spirit and acts of friendship, Brendan is finally able to come to grips with his disease, his treatment and his prospects for the future.

### **Prereading Idea**

**Stages of Grief**—When individuals suffer a loss, experience a severe disappointment, or even learn of a severe illness, they will often exhibit what have come to be known as the stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Divide students into groups, assigning each group one of the five stages. Have each group brainstorm and discuss specific behaviors a person would likely exhibit in each stage, providing examples, if possible, from their personal experiences or from characters from books, television or movies. Have each group compile their information into a poster, share their ideas with the entire group and display their poster in the classroom.

### Connecting to the World—Writing and Research Ideas

- Lark discusses her hero, the Russian ballerina Galina Romanovska, whom she saw majestically dance “The Dying Swan.” In chapter 9, Lark says, “She didn’t just portray the swan, she became the swan.” Brendan discusses his hero, Steve Nash, whom he appreciates for his outstanding athletic ability but also for his personal approach to the game—“...he’s generous. Not a ball hog” (ch. 9).

Ask students to identify a celebrity that they admire and to conduct research on that person. What are the personal characteristics of that person that makes him or her heroic, in addition to athletic ability, overall intelligence, political prowess, etc.? Have students write an introduction that could be used to announce their heroes at an awards ceremony, recognizing them for both their personal integrity and their talents and abilities.

- Brendan describes the pediatric oncology unit of his hospital, which included cheery clowns, balloons and dolphins, but also radiation and chemotherapy rooms. Have students work in groups of three or four to research hospitals in their city, area or state that specialize in pediatric oncology or that have a pediatric oncology wing. Have students include: location and name of hospital, admittance criteria, physical description, medical innovations and ways that the hospital works to ease the fears of its young charges. Each group should prepare a presentation to share with the class using PowerPoint, video or other presentation technology.

### Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel

#### *Characterization*

Authors utilize a variety of techniques to reveal the personality of individual characters, including their physical appearance, dialogue, actions, thoughts and motivations, other people’s reactions to them and more. The author clearly demonstrates the true nature of the character of both Cassie and Lark, in particular, through their actions. Cassie proves herself to be a less-than-genuine friend and girlfriend, while Lark shows that she truly does care about Brendan. Have students generate a T-chart as they work with a partner to brainstorm the actions (or, in some cases, lack of action) of the two female characters as they help Brendan deal with his leukemia. Using information from the T-chart, have partners write, practice and perform a poem-for-two-voices that contrasts the depth of their friendships.

#### *Theme*

In chapters 8 and 11, Lark expresses to Brendan her philosophy of life as a result of dealing with her illness and treatment, a philosophy which could certainly be the basis for the theme of *Cellular*. As a class, use one of these passages or another appropriate passage to write a theme statement for the story. Then have students write nonstop for 7 to 10 minutes on their philosophy of life. Have students use their “life philosophies” to generate a theme statement for their own lives. Collect and bind the philosophies and theme statements into a classroom book.

***Point of View***

The story is told in first-person narrative through the voice of Brendan. However, during the course of his illness and treatment, the author introduces a host of characters: Brendan's mother; his father; his sister, Maureen; his grandparents; his Nana; his girlfriend, Cassie; his best friend, Kesh; Brendan's coach; Lark; and Harjit Sangha, the oncology unit nurse. Have each student select one of the characters and a specific point in the story. Have students write a letter to Brendon from the viewpoint of the character, expressing their feelings and thoughts—in some cases, feelings that in the story are often outwardly inadequately expressed through ineffective actions and words.

**Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. Brendan's mother and father respond very differently to Brendan's diagnosis. How do each of them respond to Brendan now that he has been diagnosed and hospitalized? Brendan is frustrated by both of their responses, but by whose response is he the most frustrated? Why?
2. Brendan and Kesh have been best friends since they were little, but when Kesh comes to visit him, Brendan doesn't want to see him. Why? What makes the situation even more awkward?
3. In chapter 7, Brendan speaks through his narrative voice: "I close my eyes. Hear the pain in Billie's voice, but something more, underneath. Joy. Strength. As if to say Life's a bitch, so what else can you do but sing?" How does this quote about Billie Holiday's singing also pertain to Lark and her approach to her treatment and illness? Where does she find her joy, her strength?
4. In chapter 3, Brendan reflects "What if I go through all that [treatment]...and it doesn't work?" For Lark, the treatment doesn't work, but could the argument be made that it was important for her "to go through all that"? Exactly how does Lark benefit from going through the process? Or does she? How does her experience touch others?
5. Through a variety of ways, Brendan's friends and family try to show him they care though they fall far short of actually making him feel better. Only Harjit Sangha, the oncology nurse, and Lark actually make Brendan feel better. What do they do? Why are they able to help when others are not?
6. Brendan's coach says, "We're gonna win for you, son." When Brendan actually learns that the team has won regionals and his teammates give him the regionals plaque, he has an unusual reaction. How does Brendan react? Why does he react in this way?

7. Nurse Harj tells Brendan, “Don’t get too attached. Don’t get your hopes up,” and he feels more “afraid than [he has] ever felt” (ch. 13). With all that Brendan has been through, why does he feel more afraid now? What does this reaction signal about Brendan’s focus? How do his actions with Lark reveal this shift in focus?
8. When Lark dies, Brendan thinks that he cannot go on without her. However, as the story ends, the reader knows Brendan will be able to go on. What in the ending lets the reader know Brendan will be able to deal with Lark’s death?

### Writer’s Craft

#### *Similes*

The author effectively utilizes similes to show the traumatic nature of the news, the harrowing treatments and the illness to Brendan. Yet the author also uses similes to show the beauty in Lark’s life, a life that is just as filled with bad news, almost-unbearable treatments and illness. Divide students into groups of three or four and have each group find examples of similes describing Brendan and his experiences and other examples describing Lark and her experiences. Have each student select a favorite simile that applies to Brendan and a favorite simile that applies to Lark. Students should create a visual representation that depicts the similes and compares the two, such as a mobile, a collage or diorama.

#### Author Biography

**Ellen Schwartz** is the author of numerous works of fiction for children. She has taught special education, primary grades and creative writing courses. In addition to *Cellular*, Ellen has also published *Jesse’s Star* with Orca Publishers. Other published works include the Starshine series, *I’m a Vegetarian and I Love Yoga*, and her picturebook, *Mr. Belinsky’s Bagels*. Ellen Schwartz currently resides in Burnaby, British Columbia.