



# Breathing Underwater

by Alex Flinn

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## Teacher's Guide

Written By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

**A Perma-Bound Production**

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Note: The novel is set in Key Biscayne High School and south Florida in the present. The story is told in intertwining narratives: the regular font is real time-January 5th through September 2nd; the handwritten font flashes back to reveal the stages by which Nick's first love twists inexorably into abuse and are court-ordered journal entries.

### January 5

#### Justice Building, Miami, Florida

The action opens in court, as high school sophomore Caitlin McCourt is awarded a restraining order against Nicholas Andreas. Nick is rich, good looking, athletic, and intelligent. Nick cannot understand why Caitlin is overreacting because he only gave her "one slap." On the stand, Nick lies and says that he never hit her. In addition to having Nick perform community service and complete a violence prevention class, Judge Lehman orders Nick to keep a journal that explains what happened between him and Caitlin. After court, Nick's wealthy Greek-born father cruelly berates him for failing yet again.

#### Later That Day

In his first journal entry, Nick explains that he fell for Caitlin the first time he saw her, even though his best friend Tom Carter said that she was a "geek."

### January 10

Nick attends his first Family Violence class, run by Mario Ortega. Mario sets forth the rules, the most important one being taking responsibility for your

own actions. Nick meets the other class members, including Leo Sotolongo, a cool young man who claims that he does not need the class because he is not abusive.

#### Later That Day

Nick describes how he'd met Caitlin when his friend Tom intervened on his behalf.

### January 17

#### My Room

On the second week of class, Nick finds out that his father has arbitrarily sold his car, the Mustang that had been his birthday present. He arrives soaking wet and late for his group counseling session.

#### Much Later That Same Day, After I (And the Journal) Have Dried Off

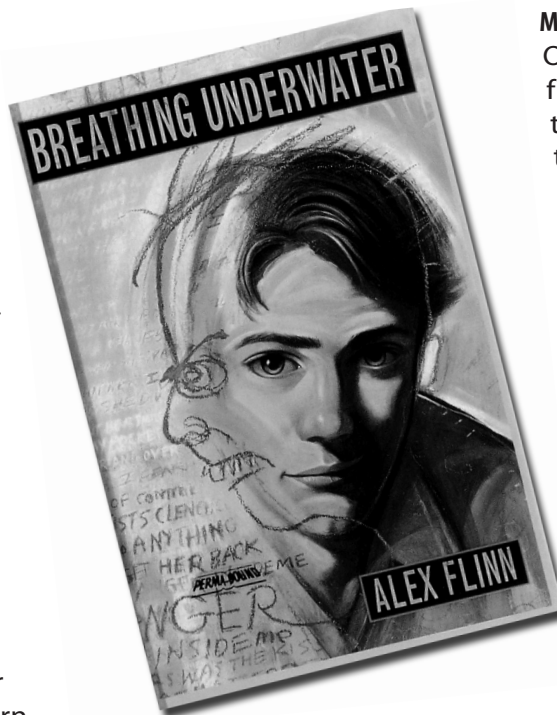
Nick spends as much time as he can at Tom's home. Nick describes an afternoon and dinner with Tom Carter's family. Tom's quite unsatisfied with his upper class family lifestyle; Nick finds it preferable to his own.

### January 21

#### Key Biscayne High

When Nick returns to school, Caitlin's schedule and locker have been changed so he rarely sees her. His old friends, including Tom, have all taken her side, and he feels completely isolated and abandoned.

In his journal, Nick describes taking Caitlin to a party at the home of a wealthy friend. When Nick tells Caitlin that Zach's parents had recently struck it rich, she's says that's probably why he started avoiding his old friends; she hopes one day she'll be the one who is "blowing off" people rather than the one shunned. Nick and Caitlin flirt at the party, and as they almost kiss, the party is disrupted by



uninvited rowdies from their school. Nick pummels one of the rowdies who reaches for Caitlin; she tells Nick he's her hero.

### **That Night in Bed**

Nick is surprised how well he remembers everything that has happened with Caitlin; he gets up early to go to school to erase any new obnoxious messages on the bulletin boards.

### **January 26**

#### **Spanish Class**

Nick tries to make amends with Tom, but Tom wants no part of it.

Nick reveals in his journal that even when he first started dating Caitlin, he was cruel and possessive. He forced her to drop her best friend Elsa and spend time only with him and his friends.

### **February 7**

#### **Family Violence Class**

Mario challenges the members of the class about their possessive behaviors with their girlfriends. Mario announces the theme of the next meeting will be their families.

#### **Later That Day**

In a section of his journal marked for the Judge to not read, Nick remembers the time his father woke and beat him for having Rosa the maid buy beer for a party.

### **February 9**

#### **Parking Lot at 7-Eleven**

Nick calls Caitlin's home but doesn't speak when she answers.

#### **That Day, Lunch Hour**

Nick is reduced to eating in the school cafeteria rather than with friends.

In another section of his journal, again marked for the Judge to not read, Nick describes presenting himself to his father with his face bruised from his beating and telling his father he'll need an excuse to miss school, a different excuse this time. Nick badgers Caitlin into staying home from the football game because he can't attend with his bruised face.

### **February 12**

#### **Hallway by Mr. Christie's Classroom**

Nick runs into Caitlin in the hallway and tries to speak with her. He is still cruel, telling her that he never loved her when she refuses to see him.

#### **Later That Day**

In his journal, Nick describes how Caitlin realized that his father beats him; she is the only person who knows.

### **February 14**

#### **Last Place I Want to Be on Valentine's Day**

In Family Violence class, Mario asks Nick about his father, but Nick refuses to tell the truth about the physical and mental abuse. Leo tells how his stepfather turned him against his twin, who committed suicide, and then Leo drops out of class.

In his journal, Nick describes how Caitlin lives with her shallow, appearance-obsessed mother, as her parents are divorced. Nick and Tom visit Caitlin, and Mrs. McCourt flirts with the boys. Nick throws out Caitlin's cheap charm necklace because he says it doesn't match her outfit and so it embarrasses him.

### **February 23**

#### **Hallway Behind the Fruitopia Machine**

Nick leaves birthday roses for Caitlin in her locker.

#### **Later That Day**

In his journal, Nick describes the evening after their first fight. Nick makes up by telling Caitlin a romantic urban legend about dolphins. Caitlin explains that she has a low self-image because she was fat—she has just lost 30 pounds—and her mother's life revolves around their appearance. Nick forces Caitlin to swim and holds her underwater. She forgives him that time.

### **February 28**

#### **Texaco Off Rickenbacker Highway**

In the present, Caitlin is dating Saint O'Connor, a football player and former friend of Nick's.

#### **My Room, Ten Minutes Later**

In his journal, Nick describes how Tom had challenged him about his control of Caitlin, but Nick brushes off his best friend's advice.

**March 1****Main Highway, Coconut Grove**

Nick follows Caitlin and Elsa. When he's stopped by a policeman and asked what he's doing, he is lucky that Leo, a fellow from his Family Violence Class, shows up acting like Nick was supposed to meet him there. The officer lets him leave because he and Leo are friends of Ray DeLeon, another police officer who is also in the Family Violence Class. Leo offers to help Nick get back with Caitlin.

Writing in his journal, Nick recalls how he had grabbed Caitlin's arm because he thought she was flirting. He called her vile names as well. Caitlin apologizes, even though she was not at fault.

**March 7****Mario's Class**

In class, Mario has the students write personal Violence Policies.

**Later That Day**

In his journal, Nick describes how he had belittled Caitlin when she told him about having to visit her father the weekend of Zach's big party, the 'big weekend' when Nick expects they'll each move beyond virginity. She relents, and Nick tells her he's the only person she can trust, the only person she should want to be with.

**March 18****Hallway Outside Mr. Christie's Class**

Nick avoids trouble when taunted by O'Connor at school. He calls Caitlin, and she reluctantly agrees to meet him on the beach where they'd seen the dolphins.

**Half an Hour Later**

In his journal, Nick describes how Caitlin was nominated for Homecoming Princess of the sophomore class, which bothered him very much because it lessened his control of her. He did not even vote for her. While riding with him in the parade, she tells him the day is special because of him.

**March 18****Beach Behind My House**

Nick waits for an hour; Caitlin does not show up at the beach. Nick is furious.

**March 24**

In his journal, Nick continues describing the night of the homecoming game. Nick and his teammates decide to crash Caitlin's sorority induction. The sorority girls are cruel in their initiations. After the treatment of the Sorority, Nick's kindness leads to a night spent with Caitlin and having sex for the first time.

**March 25****English Class**

In the present, Nick is in English class with Ms. Higgins, who assigns the class to write poems over the weekend.

**March 28****After Class, Coconut Grove**

While Nick and Mario discuss Nick's missing Caitlin and the danger of violating the restraining order, Nick remembers Caitlin's attempt to fix him Thanksgiving dinner and her mother's complaining.

In his journal, Nick writes about Thanksgiving weekend in Key West; as he got very drunk, he became increasingly abusive toward Caitlin, embarrassed his friends, and got all of them thrown out of a bar.

**March 29****Leo's House on Bayshore Drive, Coconut Grove**

Nick visits Leo, who shows him a gun and explains that's how he deals with his abusive step-father. Leo's girlfriend Neysa has dropped the restraining order against him after her family is bribed.

In his journal, Nick recalls going snorkeling with his friends. He had taunted Caitlin about the dangers of snorkeling the reef, had suggested she had gained weight, and resented her for ignoring him when she followed Liana's advice to swim closer to a nurse shark.

**March 29****10:30 p.m.—My Desk, Third Straight Hour**

Nick writes a poem about his teammates, especially Tom; he expresses his powerlessness and isolation.

In his journal, Nick describes the drive back from Key West. Furious at Caitlin, Nick almost drives the car off the bridge. When Caitlin grabs the wheel, Nick hits her hard. He buys her off with the promise of a ring.

### March 30

#### 8:00 a.m.—Miss Higgins's Classroom

In the present, Nick refuses to read his poem in English class because it is too personal. He's struck in the face as he leaves his English classroom.

In his journal, Nick recalls how Caitlin dropped him after the parkway incident.

### March 30

#### My Bedroom

Nick describes the confrontation with Saint O'Connor and Tom outside of his English class.

His journal describes how he'd pursued her after the Key West trip. After a confrontation with her mother, she does take him back when he gives her a beautiful amethyst ring.

### March 30

#### 9:00 p.m.—Mustard Watermelon Bar, South Miami

Nick meets Leo in a bar and then rejects an opportunity with a woman Leo introduces.

#### Later, When I Wake Up for the Second Time

In his journal, Nick describes forbidding Caitlin to enter the talent show, even though she has a beautiful voice and the support of her teacher and friends. When she sees Nick's clenched fist, Caitlin agrees not to audition.

### April 1

#### Passing Period After Miss Higgins's Class

After seeing his black eye and commenting on numerous bruises she's seen on Nick over the school year, Miss Higgins does not believe Nick when he says his father hadn't hit him.

In his journal, Nick writes about the night when his father sees one of Nick's condoms and congratulates him on "being a man." He explains that Nick was "a mistake" and gives Nick scotch and money for birth control pills for Caitlin.

### April 2

#### Miss Higgins's Classroom

Miss Higgins writes a clever letter to Nick's father, full of praise for Nick but warning of the abuse without naming it. She assures Nick that just because he did a bad thing does not mean that he is a bad person.

#### My Room, Later That Day

Nick rereads his poem and misses Tom.

In his journal, Nick relates a visit with Tom after drinking with his father. As much as he cares for Tom's friendship, he can't bring himself to open up about his home life.

### April 4

#### Mario's Class

Mario challenges Nick in class, but Nick won't strike him. Nick begins to open up to Mario. At community service with Leo and Neysa, Nick sees how scared Neysa is of Leo, and he decides not to spend any more time with Leo.

#### Ten Minutes Later, In My Room

Nick's journal describes how he was livid when he found out that Caitlin did try out for the talent show and has a solo. He tells her that she is a fat, talentless slob to convince her not to perform. She agrees to drop out of the show.

#### My Room

Nick realizes he is like Leo.

### April 11

#### 9:30 a.m.—Mario's Class

In class that night, Mario is easily riled. Nick overhears something about the newspaper calling and asking about Leo; Mario leaves to take the call.

In his journal, Nick begins to describe the day he and Caitlin finally broke up after a harrowing experience on a carnival ride.

#### A Minute Later

#### Mario's Empty Classroom

Nick learns that Leo killed Neysa and himself. He flees the classroom for the train, throwing away Caitlin's ring in the process.

**3:00 a.m.—Beach Behind My Father’s House**

Writing in his journal at the beach, Nick describes the night of the talent show. Caitlin had surprised him by performing; Nick beats her brutally, hitting and strangling her. The person who finally punches and pulls him off is Tom, whom he recognizes from the dolphin on his leg.

**April 12**

**7:15 a.m.—My Bedroom**

Finally realizing how badly he’d treated her, Nick calls Caitlin to apologize. Unable to believe him, Caitlin hangs up the phone.

**July 11**

**Mario’s Class (Last Day!!!)**

Six months have passed. It is the last day of Mario’s class. Nick finally realizes that he was wrong, that he has no right to beat women – or anyone. Mario reveals to the class that he abused his wife, causing her to lose their unborn child and destroying his marriage. Nick decides to retake the class and offers Mario his journal to read.

**July 11**

**1:00 p.m.**

That night, Nick stands up to his father. To his shock, his father backs down.

**September 2 (My Seventeenth Birthday)**

**7:25 a.m. Key Biscayne High Parking Lot**

Nick’s poem is published in the school literary magazine, and he and Tom apologize to each other and resume their friendship. Caitlin has gone to live with her father and attend a performing arts high school.

**Domestic Violence Timeline**

**1972** Women’s advocates in St. Paul, Minnesota start the first hotline for battered women.

Women’s advocates and Haven House in Pasadena, California establish the first shelters for battered women.

**1974** Erin Pizzey publishes *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear* in England, the first book about

domestic violence from the battered woman’s perspective.

**1976** The National Organization for Women announces the formation of a task force, co-chaired by Del Martin, to examine the problem of battering. It demands research into the problem and money for shelters.

Del Martin publishes, *Battered Wives*, the first American feminist publication showing that violence against wives is deeply rooted in sexism.

Pennsylvania establishes the first State coalition against domestic violence. It also becomes the first State to create a statute providing for orders of protection for victims of domestic violence.

*La Casa de la Madres* in San Francisco, California is opened. This was the first battered women’s shelter established by women of color.

**1977** National Communications Network for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the first national newsletter on battered women, is published. The following year, it merges with the feminist, Alliance Against Rape, to publish, *Aegis, the Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women*, a grassroots feminist forum on rape, battering, and other issues of violence affecting women.

Oregon becomes the first State to enact legislation mandating arrest in domestic violence cases.

**1978** U.S. Commission on Civil Rights holds a forum entitled Consultation on Battered Women in Washington, DC. The forum brings together hundreds of activists and results in *Battered Women: Issues of Public Policy*, which offers more than 700 pages of written and oral testimony.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a grassroots organization is organized and becomes the voice of the battered women’s movement on the national level. It establishes the vision and philosophy that will guide the development of hundreds of local battered women’s programs and State coalitions.

It also initiates the introduction of the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act in the U.S. Congress.

Rippling effects of women-led initiatives result in pioneering work in California, Washington, and Minnesota. Such initiatives led to Minnesota becoming the first State to allow probable cause or "warrantless" arrest in cases of domestic assault regardless of whether a protection order had been issued against the offender.

**1979** Office on Domestic Violence is established in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but is closed in 1981.

First congressional hearings are held on the issue of domestic violence.

After 12 black women are murdered in Boston, a public outcry about the lack of media attention to violence against women of color leads to the formation of the Combahee River Collective.

**1980** First national day of unity in October is established by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence to mourn battered women who have died, celebrate women survivors, and honor all who have worked to defeat domestic violence. National day becomes domestic violence awareness week and, in 1987, expands to a month of awareness activities.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence holds the first national conference in Washington, DC, which is attended by more than 600 battered women's advocates from 49 States. The conference gains Federal recognition of critical issues facing battered women and inspires the creation of several State coalitions.

**1982** Susan Schechter publishes *Women & Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement*, South End Press, Boston, Massachusetts.

*60 Minutes* airs a program filmed in Austin, Texas entitled, *A Place to Go*, describing the work of battered women's shelters. More viewers

watched that program than any other program during that television season.

**1984** U.S. Attorney General establishes task force on family violence to examine scope and nature of problem. Nearly 300 witnesses provide public testimony in 6 cities. The final report offers recommendations for action in many areas, including the criminal justice response, prevention and awareness, education and training, and data collection and reporting.

Passage of the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act through grassroots lobbying efforts earmarks Federal funding for programs serving domestic violence victims.

**1985** *Thurman v. Torrington* is the first Federal case in which a battered woman sues a city for police failure to protect her from her husband's violence. Tracy Thurman, who remains scarred and partially paralyzed from stab wounds inflicted by her husband, wins a \$2 million judgement against the city. The suit leads to Connecticut's passage of a mandatory arrest law.

Evelyn White publishes *Chain, Chain Change: For Black Women Dealing with Physical and Emotional Abuse*, the first book about African American women and abuse.

**1986** Children's Hospital in Boston establishes AWAKE (Advocacy for Women and Kids in Emergencies); the first advocacy program for battered women in a pediatric setting.

New York Women Against Rape, a women of color-led organization, holds the first conference against violence for women of color.

**1987** National Coalition Against Domestic Violence establishes the first national toll-free domestic violence hotline.

**1991** The Domestic Violence Coalition on Public Policy is formed by State coalitions to examine Native American public policy issues.

**1992** *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, edited by Jill Radford and Diane E.H. Russell is published.

**1993** In his introduction to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee report, *Violence Against Women: The Response to Rape: Detours on the Road to Equal Justice*, Senator Joseph Biden states, "These findings reveal a justice system that fails by any standard to meet its goals—apprehending, convicting, and incarcerating violent criminals: 98% of the victims of rape never see their attacker caught, tried, and imprisoned."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention establishes the Family Violence and Intimate Violence Prevention Team within the Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. The Center begins to fund community-based prevention efforts, studies on causality and consequences of domestic violence, evaluation programs, public education, and training.

**1994** President Clinton signs the Violence Against Women Act as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The Act provides \$156 million in State grants to bolster local law enforcement, prosecution, and victims' services to better address violence against women.

**1995** Batterer Christopher Bailey becomes the first person convicted of a felony—crossing State lines (West Virginia to Kentucky) to assault his wife, Sonya Bailey—under the Violence Against Women Act.

**1996** Congress passes the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which made dramatic changes to Federal and State welfare and child support programs. As part of the Act, the Family Violence Amendment allows States to respond with more flexibility to the needs of domestic violence victims under these new welfare and child support rules and highlights critical issues for battered women's advocates.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE) funded by the Federal Violence Against Women Act, begins operation, responding to 8,841 calls during its first month.

**1997** President Clinton signs an anti-stalking law, which makes interstate stalking and harassment a Federal offense, even if the victim has not obtained a protection order.

Sacred Hoop, the National Resource Center to End Violence Against Indian Women, begins providing technical assistance and guidance to Native communities.

Forty Latin American activists, clinicians, and researchers from the United States and Puerto Rico met in Washington, DC for the National Symposium on *La Violencia Domestica: An Emerging Dialogue Among Latinos*, with the support of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. From this Symposium, the National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence was formed.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awards funds to Cangleska, Inc. to operate Sacred Circle, a special-issue resource center to aid tribes and tribal organizations to stop violence against Native women.

**1998** The U.S. Department of Justice announces grants totaling \$53.8 million for 90 jurisdictions to help investigate and prosecute domestic violence. The grants are through the Violence Against Women Act, Grants to Encourage Arrest Policies.

**1999** Vice President Al Gore announces that the Federal government will provide \$233 million to help States and communities detect and stop violence against women and provide shelter for victims of domestic violence.

Timeline adapted from material available at: <http://www.dvmillennium.org/Timeline.htm>

## Author Sketch

Alex Flinn was born in 1966 in Glen Cove, New York, but was raised in Syosset, New York, and in Miami, Florida. Her father was a ship chandler; her mother, a homemaker.



From her childhood, Flinn devoured books. She named Astrid Lindgren, Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume, Marilyn Sachs, and Laura Ingalls Wilder as her favorite authors. From her interest in reading books came a desire to write them. Flinn recalled on her Web site that "Every poem I ever wrote in school was submitted to *Highlights* or *Cricket* magazine. I was collecting rejection slips at age seven."

By high school, Flinn had turned to singing, an interest that she carried through to college. As a result, Flinn earned her bachelor of music degree from the University of Miami in 1988, where she studied opera, singing as a coloratura, "the really loud, high-pitched soprano," as she explained on her Web site. Following graduation, she decided that opera was likely not going to be her career and so enrolled in Nova Southeastern University Law School, earning her law degree in 1992, the same year she married a fellow attorney.

While in law school, Flinn interned with the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office in a misdemeanor court and volunteered with domestic violence cases. In 2001, Flinn went into private practice at the firm of Martinez & Gutierrez in Miami. On maternity leave, she decided to return to writing.

Flinn's legal and volunteer work with battered women strongly influenced her choice of topic for *Breathing Underwater*, as did a startling statistic she discovered: about one-quarter of all high school and college women report having been in an abusive relationship. Also, a woman in a shelter for battered women where Flinn volunteered was murdered by her husband in front of the woman's children. Flinn worked this tragedy into the novel in the relationship of Leo and Neysa.

At first, Flinn used Caitlin's point of view, but soon switched to Nick's point of view. Flinn completed the novel by writing during her breaks and at lunch when she returned to the law firm. The novel received excellent reviews, as described below.

Flinn often hears from teenagers who identify with the story. In an interview, Flinn described a letter that she received from two boys in a juvenile detention system. According to Flinn, "They said the book really related to their lives and their anger. Both of them said they didn't like to read, but they liked *Breathing*."

To date, all of Flinn's novels tackle serious contemporary topics. *Breaking Point*, her second novel, concerns school violence; *Nothing to Lose* focuses on family violence. Despite her focus on intense themes, Flinn considers herself first and foremost a storyteller. "The story has to come first," she commented in her interview with *Embracing the Child*.

## Critic's Corner

*Breathing Underwater* received several impressive awards and designations. The novel was an ALA Top 10 Best Book for Young Adults and was placed on the Iowa Educational Media Association High School Book Award Master List and the Rhode Island Teen Book Award Master List. In addition, *Breathing Underwater* received a Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults List nomination, and Children's Literature Choices List. It is on the Oklahoma Sequoia Young Adult Master List, 2003-04; and earned a Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Award in 2004. Not surprisingly, *Breathing Underwater* earned excellent reviews.

Patty Campbell, reviewing the novel for Amazon.com, called *Breathing Underwater* an "extraordinarily moving novel [that is] highly relevant reading for all young men in our violence-prone society." *Publishers Weekly* called it "a gripping tale"; Joel Shoemaker, reviewing the novel for *School Library Journal*, concluded that it is "an open and honest portrayal of an all-too-common problem."

Debbie Carton, writing in *Booklist*, said that *Breathing Underwater* is a "quick and absorbing read....The situations and dialogue ring frighteningly true, perhaps due to the author's background as a lawyer



who has tried domestic violence cases." Reviewing the novel for the *Voice of Youth Advocates*, Beth Anderson wrote that the novel is "almost too painful to read," but that it also provides a "road map to warning signs" of abuse.

## Other Books by Alex Flinn

*Diva* (2006)  
*Fade to Black* (2005)  
*Nothing to Lose* (2005)  
*Breaking Point* (2003)

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review of *Breathing Underwater*; June, 2002, Kimberly L. Paone, review of *Breaking Point*, pp. 117-118; October, 2002, Barbara S. Wysocki, review of *Breaking Point*, p. 84; October, 2003, Jennifer Ralston, review of *Breathing Underwater*, p.99; March, 2004, Lynn Evarts, review of *Nothing to Lose*, p. 210.

## General Objectives

1. To understand what abuse means
2. To probe the meaning of the novel's title
3. To analyze the symbolism of the dolphin, Mustang, and ring
4. To recognize the novel's theme
5. To describe the novel's plot
6. To learn about personal responsibility
7. To find examples of compassion
8. To explore the ways that abuse is shown
9. To understand the novel's unusual narrative structure
10. To appreciate the positive role that some teachers and counselors play in a young person's life

## Specific Objectives

1. To analyze why Nick beats Caitlin
2. To probe Nick's relationship with his father
3. To explore why Caitlin accepts the abuse
4. To understand Mario's history and its impact on his life
5. To compare and contrast Leo and Nick
6. To explore why Leo kills Neysa
7. To understand why all of Nick's friends turn against him
8. To appreciate how Nick finally takes responsibility for his own actions
9. To trace how Caitlin and Nick build new lives
10. To understand the novel's ending

## Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Alex Flinn's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**suspense:** the feeling or tension or anticipation an author creates in a work. Authors create suspense by unexpected plot twists. This keeps readers interested in the story and makes them want to

read on to find out what will happen. As Flinn said in an interview: "A young adult novel must contain a good story with characters they really care about, and the 'S' word: Suspense." *Breathing Underwater* is very suspenseful as readers wonder just how far Nick will go in his abuse. How long will Caitlin take the abuse? What will Leo do?

**flashback:** a scene that breaks into the story to show an earlier part of the action. Flashbacks help fill in missing information, explain the characters' actions, and advance the plot. *Breathing Underwater* is told in a series of intertwining narratives: the regular font is real time-January 5th through September 2nd; the handwritten font flashes back to reveal the stages by which Nick's behavior twists into abuse.

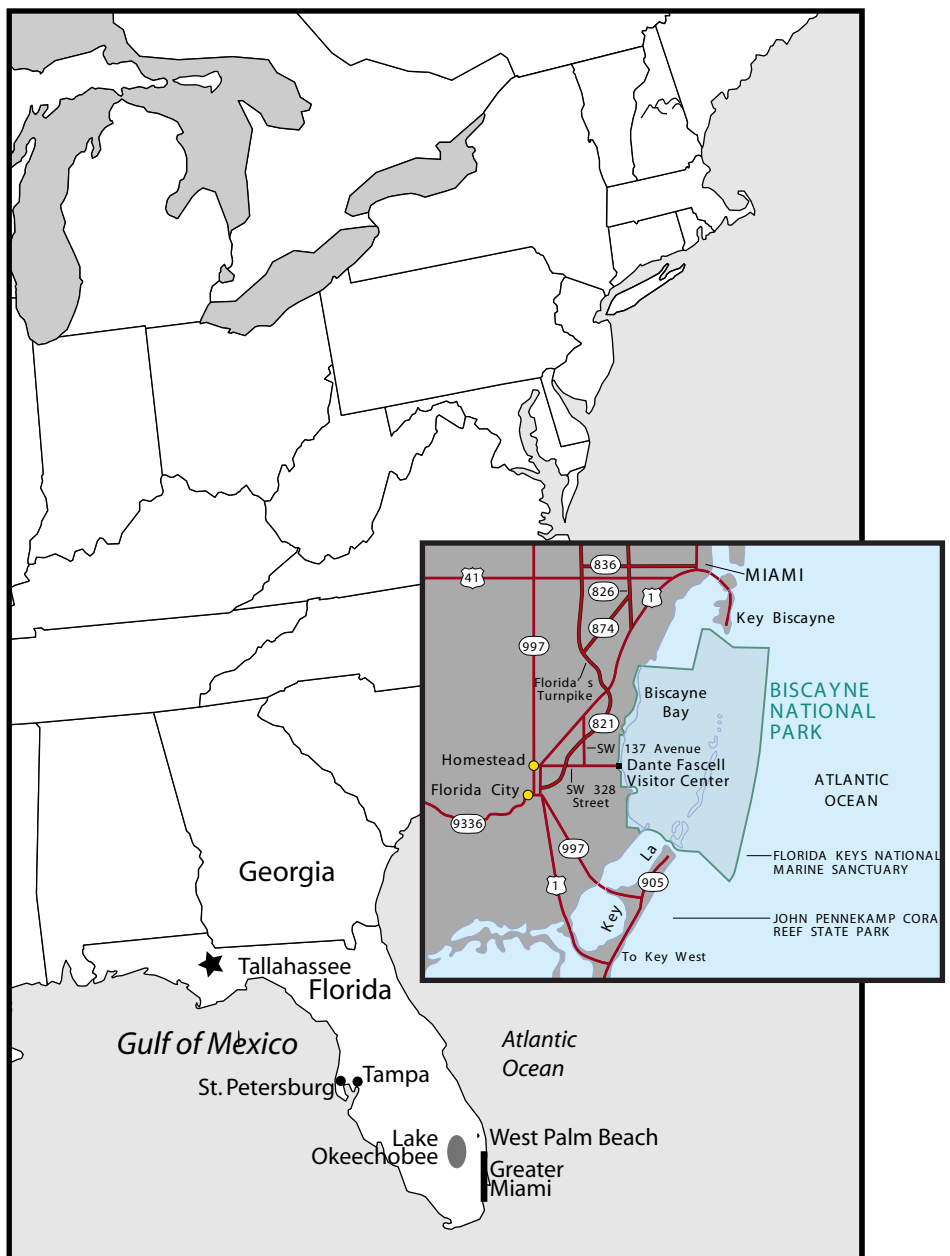
**style:** an author's distinctive way of writing. Style is made up of elements such as word choice, sentence length and structure, figures of speech, and tone. An author may change his or her style for different kinds of writing and to suit different audiences. In poetry, for example, an author might use more imagery than he or she would use in prose. In *Breathing Underwater*, Flinn uses strong language, slang, and fragments to convey the way that teenagers really talk.

### The Importance of Setting

Key Biscayne is a village in Miami-Dade County, Florida, on Key Biscayne Island south of Miami Beach and east of Miami. About 10,000 people live in the region. The Key (from the Spanish word *cayo*, for "island") is connected to Miami via the Rickenbacker Causeway, a series of bridges. This aspect of the setting is crucial to the novel, because Nick threatens Caitlin that he will drive off the Causeway. She grabs the wheel and he beats her. This is where readers realize that Nick does a great deal more than just "slap" his girlfriend, as he tells himself in the beginning of the novel.

Modern Key Biscayne started as a working-class community, as hundreds of ranch and cottage homes were built for returning Korean War veterans in the 1950s. The residents enjoyed fishing, boating and beachcombing. However, the community soon became very prosperous and its population changed. In 1969, President Richard Nixon purchased the first of his three waterfront homes, forming a compound known as the Florida White House. Nixon was joined by his wealthy friends Bebe Rebozo and industrialist Robert Abplanalp.

Today, the construction of several large resort hotels, condominium complexes, and shopping



centers has furthered the island's concentration of wealth.

Key Biscayne increasingly caters to an elite population of business moguls, high-income professionals, and a significant influx of Latin American tourists and part-time residents fleeing political and economic instability in their home countries. This aspect of the setting is very important to the novel as well, as Nick and his friends are extremely wealthy. Nick's father is an affluent businessman and Nick has been raised by a succession of Spanish-speaking housekeepers. Many of Nick's friends have similarly rich and disengaged parents. As a result, the kids have wild, unsupervised parties and destroy their parents' mansions. Some of the kids are given the keys to vacation homes and expensive boats and left alone to use them, as we see in the novel as well.

While *Breathing Underwater* could have taken place in any affluent waterfront community, it is deeply rooted in Key Biscayne.

## Cross-Curricular Sources

### Novels

Laurie Halse Anderson, *Speak*  
 Julie Dannenberg, *First Day Jitters*  
 Sarah Dessen, *Dreamland*  
 Kate Dicamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie*  
 Patricia Reilly Giff, *Pictures of Hollis Woods*  
 John Green, *Looking for Alaska*  
 David Klass, *You Don't Know Me*  
 Patricia McCormick, *Cut*  
 Jaye Murray, *Bottled Up*  
 Rob Thomas, *Rats Saw God*  
 Stephanie Tolan, *Surviving the Applewhites*  
 Jerry Spinelli, *Loser*

### Nonfiction

Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*  
 Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabe Bees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*

### Audio

*Breathing Underwater* (Audiofile)  
*Breaking Point* (Listening Library)

### DVDs and Videos

*Alma*  
*A Streetcar Named Desire*  
*Carousel*  
*Dangerous Intentions*  
*Every Nine Seconds*  
*The Fight for Peace*  
*The Magdalene Sisters*  
*Under Suspicion*

### Internet

Official Alex Flinn Web site  
<http://www.alexflinn.com>

Cynthia Leitich Smith Children's Literature Resources Web site  
<http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/>

Embracing the Child Web site Interview with Flinn  
<http://www.eyetomorrow.com/embracingth-child/>

Teenreads.com — Author Profile: Alex Flinn  
[aolsvc.teenreads.aol.com/authors/au-flinn-alex.asp](http://aolsvc.teenreads.aol.com/authors/au-flinn-alex.asp)

All About Alex Flinn at Young Adult Books  
[www.yabookscentral.com/cfusion/index.cfm?fuseAction=authors.viewAuthor&author\\_id=750](http://www.yabookscentral.com/cfusion/index.cfm?fuseAction=authors.viewAuthor&author_id=750)

## Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Alex Flinn's *Breathing Underwater* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- abusive parents
- denying responsibility
- low self esteem
- suicide
- date abuse
- legal system
- water
- dolphins
- journaling
- control
- maturity

### Motifs

- trying to break the cycle of family abuse
- not facing the fact that you harmed someone
- accepting abuse because of a poor self-image
- killing yourself and your girlfriend
- committing serious acts of violence against your girlfriend
- shattered families
- using a journal as a means of self-discovery
- coping with abandonment
- living in dysfunctional families
- understanding the importance of healthy role-models

### Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. "He hit me." (p. 5).  
*(Caitlin tells the court that Nick "hit" her. This is quite ambiguous, so readers don't know if Caitlin is grossly overreacting to some love play or if Nick did indeed strike her. Meanwhile, Nick thinks that it was only "one slap, when she pushed me way too far." As readers learn later in the book, Nick did indeed beat Caitlin, punching and strangling her. He also held her underwater and threatened to run her off a bridge.)*
2. "That brings us to the most important rule." Mario eyes each face... "You will take responsibility for your actions." (p. 17)  
*(As revealed in the opening scene cited above, Nick does not take responsibility for his actions. He even refuses to admit they occurred. The entire novel traces the process whereby Nick learns that he —and he alone —is responsible for his violence.)*
3. "Ever feel like you're breathing underwater, and you have to stop because you're gulping in too much fluid?" (p.20)  
*(The novel's title is also its central metaphor. Nick feels like he is drowning because he has been trying to act like a man but he is still an extremely immature child. Nick's father, a cruel man obsessed with business, considers Nick a "mistake" and offers no guidance. Nick's father drinks himself into senselessness and beat his wife so badly that she fled without taking Nick. Nick understands that unless he can get his life on track, he will "drown" — perhaps killing himself and his girlfriend as Leo does—but at this point, he does not have a clue how to save himself.)*
4. She struggled a moment. When she stopped, I held her there as long as my air held out. Then seconds longer. Finally I let her go. (p. 109)  
*(Continuing with the water motif, we see in this scene that Nick abuses Caitlin by holding her under when she cannot breath. This is a typical example of his abuse. He sees it as his right as a man to control "his woman," but readers understand that he is a vicious abuser—like his father.)*
5. "I mean, that was rotten, throwing her necklace out the window. You call her names too, probably don't know you're doing it, but it's cruel." (p. 117)  
*(Nick's abuse of Caitlin has gotten so bad that even his best friend Tom calls him on it. Tom mentions that the other kids in the group have noticed it as well. Tom is both embarrassed and ashamed and he means well, but Nick ignores his advice although they are as close as brothers. This scene reveals that Nick is unable to take responsibility for his actions, unable to help himself until he has sunk to rock bottom.)*
6. Right into the water. I made like I'd do it, crash through the guardrail. (p. 184)  
*(Nick has just finished telling Caitlin that his mother ran from his father, "the monster," and left him all alone with him to take all his abuse. After this primal rejection, Nick cannot take another rebuff and so is determined to control Caitlin. To that end, he tests her love by pretending to plunge them both over the guardrail into the ocean. When Caitlin grabs the wheel, he strikes her hard. This dissipates his anger at his mother, replaced by regret. This scene reveals the pattern of abuse: the rage builds up in the abuser until he must strike out. He knows no other way to cope with his anger. Mario teaches him to recognize his anger and channel it in a non-abusive way.)*
7. I nodded. I was the mistake. (p. 209)  
*(Yet again, Nick's father reminds Nick that he was the result of a night of casual sex, the biggest mistake of his father's life. We see how Nick's father has rejected him, another cause of his low self-esteem and rage. Nick foists on Caitlin the abuse that his father has heaped on him.)*
8. I was like Leo. (p. 230)  
*(Leo Sotolongo, another student in the Violence Prevention Class, shot his girlfriend Neysa and then turned the gun on himself. This is the novel's turning point, as Nick realizes that he and Leo are far more similar than he has been willing to admit. From this point on, Nick works at taking responsibility and trying to make amends for his actions.)*

9. "Bitch!" I slapped her across the face and reeled back from the force of the blow. (p. 242)  
*(In a flashback, Nick recalls how he beat Caitlin and likely would have killed her had Tom not pulled him off. We see that the "one slap" Nick claimed in the beginning of the novel was in fact a brutal beating. By reliving this moment, Nick is able to face what he has really done.)*
10. "I want to retake the class," I say. (p. 253)  
*(Nick realizes that learning to accept responsibility for his action and break the cycle of abuse will take longer than the six months mandated by the judge. To that end, he tells Mario that he wants to continue in the program so he can make sure that he never harms anyone else again.)*

## Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

- When and where does the story take place?  
*(The story takes place in a wealthy enclave of Key Biscayne, Florida, in the present.)*
- What is unusual about the narrative form of this novel?  
*(The story is told in intertwining narratives: the regular font is real time, January 5th through September 2nd; the handwritten font flashes back to reveal how Nick fell in love with Caitlin and then abused her.)*
- Where is Nick when the novel opens? Why is he there?  
*(He is in court as Caitlin gets a restraining order against him. He is there because he beat Caitlin.)*
- Who tears Nick off Caitlin when he is beating her? How can you identify this character?  
*(Tom tears Nick off Caitlin, likely saving her life. Readers can tell this because of the dolphin on Tom's leg.)*
- What was the Violence Prevention Class that Nick took really about?  
*(It was really all about being a man, a "real man." It is about "doing the right thing even if you don't want to do it," as Nick says.)*

### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

- How would you describe the relationship between Nick and his father?  
*(The relationship is abusive and twisted. Nick's father has often told Nick that he was the biggest "mistake" of his life. Nick's father beats him, leaving huge bruises that prevent Nick from attending school for days at a time. Nick hates and fears his father.)*
- Why does Nick keep beating Caitlin?  
*(He wants to control her; he is following the pattern he learned at home. He cannot believe that she would really love him because he has so little self-esteem so he continually looks for "proof" of her love.)*
- What do dolphins represent in the novel?  
*(They stand for innocence, love, and acceptance. Nick shows Caitlin the dolphins in the ocean off his yard, sharing with her his joy in their innocence. Tom, Nick's best friend, creates a dolphin on his leg with suntan cream. In so doing, Tom becomes linked to the dolphin symbolism. Later, Tom pulls Nick from Caitlin while Nick is beating her, preventing Nick from harming her even more, perhaps even killing her. At the end of the novel, Tom accepts Nick back as his best friend.)*

### Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

- What parts of the novel did you find especially realistic? In what ways?  
*(Students are likely to say that the cycle of abuse is realistic, as are the scenes of the teenagers having unsupervised wild parties and destroying homes.)*
- Did you like the form of the novel? Why or why not?  
*(Readers who like the unusual format might say that it increases the suspense, as the story of Nick and Caitlin's relationship unfolds through a series of flashbacks. Those who did not like the format are likely to have found it confusing.)*

### Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

- Describe what advice you would have given Caitlin if you were Elsa or Saint.
- Working with a small group of classmates, role-play a dialogue between Mario and Nick in which they discuss healthy ways to channel anger and aggression.

## Across the Curriculum

### Art/Music

1. Make a travel brochure for Miami-Dade, Florida. Entice people to visit the city.
2. Design a new mascot for Nick's football team.
3. Make collage on the theme of violence and abuse.
4. Draw or paint a new cover for the novel.
5. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main events.
6. Choose an especially dramatic scene. Play background music while you read the scene to a small group of friends.
7. Make a playlist of ten songs that Nick and his friends would listen to on the beach.
8. Write the tragic ballad of Leo and Neysa.

### Language Arts

1. Writing as Nick, summarize what happened between him and Caitlin. Writing as Caitlin, do the same thing. Then compare and contrast the two summaries. How does the point of view affect the retelling?
2. What do you think Judge Lehman hopes to accomplish by making Nick keep a journal of his relationship with Caitlin? Add two more entries to the journal, both written five years after the incidents Nick describes.
3. Write a love poem from Nick to Caitlin.
4. In an essay, describe at least three things that you learned about Florida from *Breathing Underwater*. Based on your examples, conclude with specific reasons why or why not you would like to visit Florida.
5. Writing as Nick's father, explain what life was like for you back home in Greece with your father.
6. Nick jokes about writing his journal in the style of Dr. Seuss. Choose any one entry and rewrite a page of it in Dr. Seuss' style.

### History/Social Studies

1. Nick refers to the Rotary Club. Find out what this club does. If possible, attend a local Rotary meeting.
2. Nick refers to the recent Cuban immigration to Miami. Report on current events in Cuba to explain why so many Cubans have come to Miami and why so many more Cubans want to immigrate there.
3. Call or write to your local police station to find out the punishments for abuse similar to the acts Nick commits.
4. Find three local resources for an abused woman like Caitlin. Include phone numbers, addresses, and the types of services they offer.
5. Make a map of Nick's father's homeland, Greece.

### Speech/Drama

1. Working with a partner, act out the scene where Nick accuses Caitlin of flirting with Derek.
2. With a team of classmates, debate whether Nick will abuse other women. Is he "cured"? Why or why not?
3. In a roundtable discussion, explore ways to deal with the abuse Nick experiences at his father's hands.
4. Tom shuns Nick because of Nick's conduct toward Caitlin. Was this right? What, if any, are our obligations to our friends? Discuss this issue with a small group of classmates.
5. Debate whether or not Caitlin's mother could have prevented the abuse.

### Science/Math

1. Make a timeline of the major events in the story. Underline the turning point in the story.
2. Nick alludes to the significant Cuban immigration into Miami. On a graph, show the ethnicity of Miami's residents. What percentage are Cuban, Native American, and so on?

3. Find out how many women are killed each year by their spouses or partners. Show the results on a chart.
4. Create a garden for Key Biscayne. Choose at least five plants that would grow well in the region with a minimum of care.
5. Nick is concerned with dolphins. Find out more about these creatures. For instance, how are they classified? Are they whales? How do they communicate? Share your result on a poster or in a small pamphlet.

### **Alternate Assessment**

1. Write a character sketch for Nick.
2. Mario explains the class rules. Write at least five rules for your school. Be ready to justify each rule.
3. What does the title "Breathing Underwater" mean? Discuss the water imagery in the novel and how it relates to the title.
4. Take Nick ten years in the future and explain what his life is like. Is he married? What is his job?
5. In what ways are the young men in Mario's Family Violence Class different from one another? In what ways are they the same?

### **Teacher's Notes**

## Vocabulary

Match each word to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- |                    |                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| ___ 1. flinch      | A. disobey                       |
| ___ 2. altercation | B. stare rudely                  |
| ___ 3. illegible   | C. fiction                       |
| ___ 4. deity       | D. shrink back                   |
| ___ 5. sprint      | E. walks slowly                  |
| ___ 6. smirk       | F. emit an unpleasant odor       |
| ___ 7. figment     | G. short fast run                |
| ___ 8. vermin      | H. small token of affection      |
| ___ 9. mayhem      | I. blot out, eliminate           |
| ___ 10. obliterate | J. cannot be read                |
| ___ 11. reek       | K. bugs, pests                   |
| ___ 12. bliss      | L. overwhelming pride, arrogance |
| ___ 13. gnarled    | M. sarcastic grin                |
| ___ 14. ambles     | N. twisted                       |
| ___ 15. hubris     | O. god                           |
| ___ 16. glare      | P. huge                          |
| ___ 17. candor     | Q. bedlam                        |
| ___ 18. massive    | R. ecstasy                       |
| ___ 19. violate    | S. honesty                       |
| ___ 20. trinket    | T. fight                         |



## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| A. Nick Andreas    | F. Mario Ortega   |
| B. Tom Carter      | G. Saint O'Connor |
| C. Caitlin McCourt | H. Elsa           |
| D. Leo Sotolongo   | I. Neysa          |
| E. Wimpy           | J. Teresa         |

- \_\_\_\_ 1. Nick's girlfriend
- \_\_\_\_ 2. Caitlin's best friend; Nick tries to force her and Caitlin apart
- \_\_\_\_ 3. Mario's first wife
- \_\_\_\_ 4. man who pushed his pregnant wife out of a speeding car
- \_\_\_\_ 5. man who kills himself and his girlfriend
- \_\_\_\_ 6. novel's narrator
- \_\_\_\_ 7. Leo's girlfriend
- \_\_\_\_ 8. Tom's dog
- \_\_\_\_ 9. kind, huge football player who dates Caitlin after she breaks up with Nick
- \_\_\_\_ 10. Nick's best friend

### Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Circle the term that best completes each of the following statements.

1. The novel is set in **(Los Angeles, Key Biscayne)** in the present.
2. In addition to having Nick perform community service and complete a violence prevention class, Judge Lehman orders Nick to **(keep a journal, get a haircut)**.
3. Leo tells how his stepfather turned him against his **(mother, twin)** who committed suicide, but then Leo drops out of class.
4. Nick rips a **(blouse, necklace)** off Caitlin and throws it out the window because he says it is cheap and so embarrasses him.
5. Nick recalls how he slapped Caitlin because he thought she was **(flirting, slacking off in school)**.
6. In class, Mario has the students write personal **(apologies to people they struck, violence policies)**.
7. In his journal, Nick describes how Caitlin was elected **(Class President, Homecoming Princess)**, which bothered him very much because it lessened his control of her.
8. Ms. Higgins assigns the class to write a **(poem, research paper)** over Thanksgiving weekend.
9. Nick forbids Caitlin to enter the **(talent show, quiz bowl)** even though she has the support of her teacher and friends.
10. Nick's father explains that Nick was a **(“blessing,” “mistake”)** and gives Nick scotch and money for gifts for Caitlin.

## Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

### Part III: Symbols (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

1. dolphins
2. the amethyst ring
3. the football jersey
4. the gun
5. the Mustang

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Do you think Nick is less guilty because of his father's abuse, or is that only an excuse for his bad behavior? Prove your point with examples.
2. Nick tells Caitlin, "We're two of a kind," and she agrees. Is his statement true? How are Nick and Caitlin similar? How are they different?
3. In what way does *Breathing Underwater* prove the old saying, "Like father, like son"?
4. At first, Nick resists taking responsibility for what he has done. He also resists participating in counseling. Why does Nick change? Which events help him take responsibility for his actions?

## Comprehension Test B

### Part I: Quote Identification (20 points)

Briefly explain why each quote is important in the novel.

1. One slap, when she pushed me way too far.
2. "Ever feel like you're breathing underwater, and you have to stop because you're gulping in too much fluid?"
3. She struggled a moment. When she stopped, I held her there as long as my air held out. Then seconds longer. Finally I let her go.
4. I *was* like Leo.
5. My hand was closing around her neck, barely knowing who she was.

### Part II: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Desmond Rodgers | A. Nick's perceptive English teacher                        |
| ___ 2. Nick Andreas    | B. Tom's Cuban girlfriend                                   |
| ___ 3. Caitlin McCourt | C. Nick's latest housekeeper                                |
| ___ 4. Liana           | D. The "Psycho" in class                                    |
| ___ 5. Tom Carter      | E. Caitlin's closest friend                                 |
| ___ 6. Mario Ortega    | F. sixteen-year-old who beats his girlfriend                |
| ___ 7. A.J.            | G. man who first lived in Nick's house, according to legend |
| ___ 8. Miss Higgins    | H. Nick's girlfriend  |
| ___ 9. Elsa            | I. Nick's best friend, his surrogate brother                |
| ___ 10. Rosa           | J. man who runs the Violence Prevention class               |

## Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if a part is false.

- \_\_\_ 1. The novel is set in Key Biscayne High School and south Florida.
- \_\_\_ 2. Nick is rich, good looking, athletic, but not especially good in school. His grades are Cs and Ds, to his father's embarrassment.
- \_\_\_ 3. The most important rule in the Violence Prevention Class is taking responsibility for your own actions.
- \_\_\_ 4. Nick's mother died of cancer when Nick was fifteen years old, and now Nick is alone with his abusive, cruel father.
- \_\_\_ 5. Despite the restraining order, Nick calls Caitlin, stalks her in school, and leaves gifts in her locker.
- \_\_\_ 6. Nick and Tom visit Caitlin, and Mrs. McCourt flirts with the boys.
- \_\_\_ 7. Caitlin explains that she has a low self-image because she was fat—she has just lost 30 pounds—and her mother's life revolves around their appearance.
- \_\_\_ 8. In his journal, Nick describes how Caitlin was elected Class President for the sophomore class, which bothered him very much because it lessened his control of her. He did not even vote for her.
- \_\_\_ 9. Nick recalls how Caitlin dropped him after the parkway incident but took him back when she saw the beautiful diamond watch that Nick bought her.
- \_\_\_ 10. Nick's poem is published in the school literary magazine and he and Tom resume their friendship. Caitlin goes to live with her father and attends a different high school.

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Compare and contrast Tom and Nick. How are their lives similar and different?
- 2. Explain what the title means. Who or what is "breathing underwater"?
- 3. Analyze how the story would be different if told from Mario's point of view.
- 4. Explain what function Leo Sotolongo fulfills in the novel.

**Answer Key**

**VOCABULARY**

- |      |       |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. M  | 11. F | 16. B |
| 2. T | 7. C  | 12. R | 17. S |
| 3. J | 8. K  | 13. N | 18. P |
| 4. O | 9. Q  | 14. E | 19. A |
| 5. G | 10. I | 15. L | 20. H |

**COMPREHENSION TEST A**

**Part I: Matching (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. A  |
| 2. H | 7. I  |
| 3. J | 8. E  |
| 4. F | 9. G  |
| 5. D | 10. B |

**Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)**

- |                   |                        |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Key Biscayne   | 6. violence policies   |
| 2. keep a journal | 7. Homecoming Princess |
| 3. twin           | 8. poem                |
| 4. necklace       | 9. talent show         |
| 5. flirting       | 10. "mistake"          |

**Part II: Symbols (20 points)**

- Dolphins stand for innocence, love, and acceptance. Nick shows Caitlin the dolphins in the water off his yard, sharing with her his joy in their innocence. Tom, Nick’s best friend, creates a dolphin on his leg with suntan cream. In so doing, Tom becomes linked to the dolphin symbolism. Later, Tom pulls Nick from Caitlin while Nick is beating her, preventing Nick from harming her even more, perhaps even killing her. At the end of the novel, Tom accepts Nick back as his best friend.
- Nick gets Caitlin to forgive him for beating her by giving her an amethyst ring. Later, when she returns the ring, he throws it away. The ring symbolizes the way that many abusers buy off their victims, usually women, with expensive baubles.
- Nick and his father had gone to a football game together, their one and only father-son day together. Nick’s father had bought him a football jersey, which Nick wore to bed for months. This symbolizes the love that Nick never got from his father and his yearning for a typical, loving father-son relationship.

- Leo shows Nick the gun. At that moment, Nick realizes that Leo is very dangerous and breaks off the friendship. Leo does indeed kill his girlfriend and himself. The gun, then, symbolizes the worst possible outcome of domestic violence.
- The Mustang had been Nick’s birthday gift from his father. His father takes the car back and sells it to punish Nick. On another level, the car has a small scratch, barely visible, and so Nick’s father rejects it. This shows his insistence on perfection and “show.” Nick tries his best to meet his father’s standards for perfection, but of course no one can be perfect.

**Part IV. Essay (40 points)**

Answers will vary.

**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Quote Identification (20 points)**

- Caitlin tells the court that Nick “hit” her. This is quite ambiguous, so readers don’t know if Caitlin is grossly overreacting to some love play or if Nick did indeed strike her. Meanwhile, Nick thinks that it was only “one slap, when she pushed me way too far.” As readers learn later in the book, Nick did indeed beat Caitlin, punching and strangling her. He also held her underwater and threatened to run her off a bridge.
- The novel’s title is also its central metaphor. Nick feels like he is drowning because he has been trying to act like a man but he is still an extremely immature child. Nick’s father, a cruel man obsessed with business, considers Nick a “mistake” and offers no guidance. Nick’s father drinks himself into senselessness each night and beat his wife so badly that she fled without taking Nick. Nick understands that unless he can get his life on track, he will “drown” – likely kill himself and his girlfriend as Leo does—but at this point, he does not have a clue how to save himself.
- Continuing with the water motif, we see in this scene that Nick abuses Caitlin by holding her under when she cannot breath. This is a typical example of his abuse. He sees it as his right as a man to control “his woman,” but readers understand that he is a vicious abuser—like his father.

4. Leo Sotolongo, another student in the Violence Prevention Class, shot his girlfriend Neysa and then turned the gun on himself. This is the novel's turning point, as Nick realizes that he and Leo are far more similar than he is willing to admit. From this point on, Nick works at taking responsibility and trying to make amends for his actions.
5. In a flashback, Nick recalls how he beat Caitlin and likely would have killed her had Tom not pulled him off. We see that the "one slap" Nick claimed in the beginning of the novel was in fact a brutal beating. By reliving this moment, Nick is able to face what he has really done.

**Part III: Matching (20 points)**

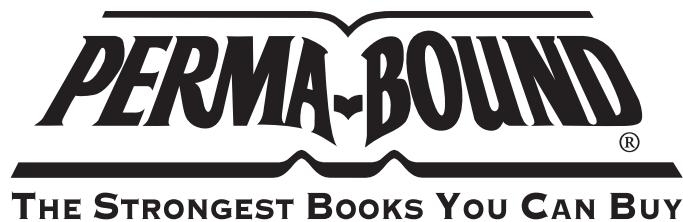
- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. J  |
| 2. F | 7. D  |
| 3. H | 8. A  |
| 4. B | 9. E  |
| 5. I | 10. C |

**Part III: True/False (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T  |
| 2. F | 7. T  |
| 3. T | 8. F  |
| 4. F | 9. F  |
| 5. T | 10. T |

**Part IV. Essay (40 points)**

Answers will vary.



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