

**READING GROUP GUIDE FOR BREATHING UNDERWATER  
BY ALEX FLINN**

1. 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 hurt her.

Does Nick believe this? Why does he not admit the truth to himself?

2. What do you think Judge Lehman hopes to accomplish by making Nick keep a journal, detailing his relationship with Caitlin? How does keeping the journal differ from discussing the same incidents in Mario's class? Would simply keeping the journal without the class yield the same result? What about just attending the class?

3. Comparing himself to Tom, Nick says that 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? Can you think of circumstances about your own life which have changed the type of person you are?

4. At the beginning of the book, 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. Should Tom have reacted sooner to Nick's conduct? What is someone's obligation to stop conduct which endangers others if he is not directly involved? Have you ever had a friend who behaved in a way which was unacceptable? What, if anything, did you do?

6. Nick wishes to conceal his abuse at his father's hands. Why? In what way would it have been to Nick's benefit to tell someone? Could it have been to his detriment?

7. Nick says to Caitlin, "We're two of a kind," and she agrees. Is his statement true? In what ways are Nick and Caitlin similar? How are they different?

8. How are our perceptions of the characters in the book (Saint, Elsa, and Leo, especially) colored by Nick's opinions? If the book was narrated by Caitlin, would our opinions be different? What if it was narrated by Elsa?

9. Nick relates to Leo and is deeply affected by his murder-suicide. Would Nick have gone as far as Leo without help? Why or why not?

10. 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?

11. Does Caitlin have any qualities which make her an easy target for someone like Nick? Would another girl react differently to him? Conversely, does Caitlin have any qualities which make it easier for her to leave Nick (and stay away) in the end?

12. Throughout the book, Caitlin believes that, were she not Nick's girlfriend, she would not enjoy the friendships and popularity she's gained. Is this the only (or main) reason she stays with Nick? What other reasons might there be? Is Caitlin correct in her assessment of their friends?

13. 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 friendships with guys in the class differ from his friendship with Tom?

14. At the end of the book, Nick says that his father's gift of an expensive car is "the best he can do," indicating that he believes his father incapable of having a relationship with him. Is this true? Is there anything Nick might do to improve the relationship? Does he want to? Why should or shouldn't Caitlin's decision about her father be different from Nick's?

15. In the end, 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? Do you think that Nick, given the choice, would want things "like they used to be" when he was dating Caitlin?

16. What does the title phrase, "Breathing Underwater" mean? Discuss the significant scenes involving various forms of water. How do these scenes relate to the title phrase?

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