



# The Break-In

Tish Cohen

**Reading Level: 2-3**

**Interest Level: Adult**

## Book Summary

Marcus and Alex have two things in common—they each have a broken heart and a plan. Marcus wants to win back his girlfriend. He is ready to stage a break-in for her. Eleven-year-old Alex wants to find his father's killer. He has a gun and may be ready to use it. When Marcus and Alex cross paths, they make a mess. At the same time, they begin to understand each other, in a strange way. *The Break-In* is a funny story about finding brotherhood in dark times.

## Author Biography

As a child, Tish Cohen knew she wanted to write novels, but didn't have the nerve. As an adult, Tish finally took the risk and began to write. Today, she is the bestselling author of six books. Tish also writes articles for *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*. She lives in Toronto with her two sons.

*Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.*

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

### Book Cover and Title

1. Have students read the title and describe what they see on the front cover. Ask students to share their feelings and thoughts as they look at the cover. Ask students, “What do you think the book is about?”
2. Read the description of the book on the back cover. Ask students the following questions:

What do you think “finding brotherhood in dark times” means?

Why do you think Alex and Marcus will find brotherhood?

## WORKING WITH THE BOOK

### Characters

Tell students that readers can learn about the characters in a novel in three ways—from (1) what the writer tells us, (2) what the characters say, do, and think, and (3) what others think and say about the characters.

As students read the novel, have them note a few examples from each chapter, where applicable, of how the writer develops the character of Mr. Morrison. Encourage students to make inferences about the character, where possible. After students have read the entire book, have them share their examples in small groups.

### How do we make inferences?

Active readers use their experience and knowledge to make educated guesses about characters and their motives. Readers who make inferences use clues in the text together with their own experiences to help them figure out the author’s meaning.

What the writer tells us about Mr. Morrison

Inference

What Mr. Morrison says, does, and thinks

Inference

What other characters think and say about Mr. Morrison

Inference

Have students use their notes to discuss the following questions:

1. What details about Mr. Morrison stand out in your mind? Why do you think these details come to mind?
2. What is your impression of Mr. Morrison? Did your impression of him change as you read through the novel? If yes, how and why? If no, why not?
3. Which characters give the reader the most information about Mr. Morrison? How much of the information is related directly from Mr. Morrison himself? Do you think the reader receives a balanced description of Mr. Morrison? Explain why or why not. What additional information about Mr. Morrison might give the reader a more balanced impression of Mr. Morrison?
4. Would you want to live next door to Mr. Morrison? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever formed an opinion of someone based only on information from others? Share the experience. What was your initial opinion of the person? Did your opinion of the person change? How and why? What did you learn from the experience?

## Setting

Explain to the students that the setting provides details of when and where events take place. These details can add to the story in different ways (e.g., underline a theme or invoke thoughts and feelings.) After they have read the entire book, have students discuss the following questions:

1. Where do the events in Chapter 1 take place? Why are people gathered here?
2. Alex has lost his father. The theme of loss runs through the story. Who else in the story loses something? What do they lose?
3. How does Alex initially cope with the loss of his father? How does Marcus initially cope with the loss of Lisa?
4. By the end of the story, neither Alex nor Marcus regains what they initially lost. But what do they gain?
5. Explain in your own words what the following statement means: When one door closes, another door opens. Explain to what extent this statement holds true for Alex and Marcus. In general, do you agree with the statement? Use examples to support your opinion.

## Plot

Explain to the students that the plot moves forward as Alex and Marcus act on their emotions. After they have read the entire book, have students discuss the following questions:

1. Sometimes emotions “cloud a person’s thinking.” What does this mean? Give an example of how emotions cloud Marcus’s and Alex’s thinking.
2. Give specific examples of how the following emotions drive the actions of Alex and Marcus:

love	guilt	fear
anger	sadness	compassion
3. Negative emotions lead to negative actions; positive emotions lead to positive actions. Do you agree with this statement? Explain why or why not. Use examples from your discussion of question 2 to support your opinion.
4. Describe a time that an emotion, positive or negative, drove your actions. What was the emotion? What caused the emotion? How did the emotion affect your actions? What was the result of your actions? Would you act differently now in the same situation? Why or why not?

**TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. “You’re the man of the house now, son. It’s up to you to take care of things around here.” (page 13)
  - (a) Why is Alex the “man of the house” now?
  - (b) What do you think the sergeant means by “take care of things around here”? Why do you think the sergeant tells Alex that he has to take care of things?
  - (c) What does Alex think the sergeant means? How does Alex’s understanding of the sergeant’s words become important later on in the story?
  
2. “He didn’t want to be late for therapy.” (page 14)
  - (a) Why is Marcus in therapy? Do you think being in therapy helps him? If yes, explain how. If no, explain why not.
  - (b) What truth does Marcus finally realize about Lisa? How does he come to realize this truth?
  - (c) Most people are sometimes blind to truths that others see. Why do you think this blindness occurs? Give examples.
  - (d) Think about the people in your life. Who helps you realize truths you may not see at first? Who do you help?
  
3. “Not on the inside...” (page 19)
  - (a) Why did Alex not feel fine on the inside? How was he feeling on the inside? Why?
  - (b) Describe the moment when Alex finally feels fine on the inside. Explain why he feels fine.
  - (c) Why do you think Alex carried his burden of guilt instead of confiding in someone, like his mother?
  - (d) Why do you think adults sometimes carry bad feelings such as guilt or deep sadness on the inside instead of reaching out for help? In what ways do people reach out for help?
  
4. “He and his dad had been part of something that morning.” (page 24)
  - (a) Describe what Alex and his dad had been part of.
  - (b) How do you think Alex felt with his “coffee in hand” at the hardware store? Explain why.

- (c) Why do you think Alex's father shared this experience with his son?
- (d) How do you think Alex's father would have felt about Alex and his behaviour in the days following the funeral? Give reasons for your answer.
5. "No one notices their neighbours. Everyone's too busy with their own crap."  
(page 31)
- (a) Why does Lisa say this?
- (b) How do Lisa's words reflect her own character?
- (c) In general, do you think Lisa's words are true? Give reasons for your opinion.
- (d) Do you think Lisa's words apply equally to rural and urban communities? Support your opinion with examples.
- (e) How have neighbourhoods changed since you were a young child? In what other ways, besides knowing the people who live around you, do people get a sense of community?
6. "Maybe, just maybe, he'd get his life back, too." (page 31)
- (a) What does Marcus mean by getting "his life" back? What does he think he has to do to get his life back?
- (b) Does Marcus get his life back? Explain how. Is it the life he expected? Explain why or why not.
- (c) In general, do you think people's lives go in the way they expect? In what ways do people try to direct or plan their lives? What kinds of things—both positive and negative—change the way a person's life goes?
7. "Probably memorizing the colour of his hair, the space between his eyes, the make of his car." (page 32)
- (a) Who was "probably memorizing" whose hair?
- (b) Do you think Marcus's belief was right? Explain why or why not.
- (c) What other details in the paragraph are probably exaggerations. Why do you think Marcus saw the scene in an exaggerated way?
- (d) "You look guilty!" What behaviours and words make a person look guilty? Do any of these behaviours and words describe you?

8. “How could I have been so cruel as to include an innocent creature in my revenge ...” (page 59)
- (a) What “innocent creature” is Alex talking about? Why is the creature innocent?
  - (b) In your opinion, how innocent was Marcus in taking part in Alex’s plan for revenge? How innocent was Alex? How innocent was Marcus in carrying out Lisa’s plan? Give reasons for your answers.
  - (c) In your opinion, should the law be applied equally to everyone, or should cases of breaking the law and handing out justice be looked at case by case? Use examples to support your opinion.
9. “She’s real sweet. You can’t judge a person in three seconds like that.” (page 69)
- (a) Why does Marcus say this to Alex?
  - (b) If Lisa had looked her best the first time Alex saw her in person, do you think Alex’s opinion of her would have changed? Explain why or why not.
  - (c) What accounts for the difference between Alex’s and Marcus’s opinion of Lisa? Who most likely did judge Lisa “in three seconds”—Alex or Marcus? Explain why.
  - (d) In your opinion, do you think society sometimes favours people who are seen as being physically attractive? Support your opinion with examples.
10. Some sentences take on a deeper, more important meaning after you know the whole story. Explain how the meaning of the each sentence below changes after knowing the whole story.
- (a) “I still don’t understand why I had to buy you a pet spider right now,” Alex’s mother said. “You can’t even hug it and get any sort of comfort.” (page 9)
  - (b) “When he and Lisa lived here, the rooms looked less comfortable. Not like a place you stay at for very long. More like a place you stop at on your way to someplace else.” (page 38)
  - (c) “But it looked smaller and less important than he remembered.” (page 67)
  - (d) “She was wearing this pink dress. Or maybe light purple ... Doesn’t matter which.” (page 69)



**WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. Choose a character or event from the novel that you connected with in some way. For example, did the character or event remind you of something in your life? Cause an emotional reaction in you? Teach you something? Describe how and why in a paragraph.

2. Imagine you are Marcus. Write a letter to Lisa explaining why you are leaving her.

*Dear Lisa,  
I had a lot of time to think while I was in the hospital.*

3. Imagine you are Alex. Write a letter to your dad explaining your behaviour in the days after the funeral. Include your thoughts and feelings.

*Dear Dad,  
Do you remember the day you took me to the hardware store to buy some paint? I felt so grown up. But I don't think I've been acting so grown up lately.*

4. Mr. Morrison is a character that is hard to forget. Think back to your younger days. Think of a person you did not know well but who stands out in your memory. Write a paragraph describing the person in such a way that the reader will remember the person as much as you do.
5. Contact Tish Cohen at [tish@tishcohen.com](mailto:tish@tishcohen.com) and tell her your opinion of her book. Remember to include reasons for your opinion.

## PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

### 1. Explore Ideas of Beauty

- (a) Have the students brainstorm a list of ten Hollywood actors. Then have the students decide which of the actors on their list is, in their opinion, good-looking. Ask the students to think about and share ideas on how the media (both print and visual) shape our beliefs about beauty. Students can think about TV stars, people featured on magazine covers, mannequins they see in store windows, people they see in ads, etc. Finally, ask the students to compare their ideas of beauty to the ideas of beauty held by society.
- (b) Show the students three images of things that people often do not see as being beautiful (e.g., a spider, a weed, a brown apple core). Have the students look at the images one by one and share any feelings or thoughts they have. Encourage the students to find something they like about each image (e.g., a colour, a texture, a shape). Then have students think about and explain why they reacted to each image as they did.

As a follow-up, take a walk around the surrounding community with the students with the purpose of finding some beauty in objects that are often overlooked or deemed not beautiful.

### 2. Explore Your Neighbourhood

Mr. Morrison stood out as a character in his neighbourhood. Ask students to discuss the meaning of the phrase, “It takes all kinds.” Then have students think about the characters in their neighbourhood—those they know well and those they may not know so well. Provide students with the materials needed (e.g., magazines, newspapers, catalogues, access to online image sites) to create a collage that represents the characters in their neighbourhoods. Then have students explain what each element of their collage represents. Finally, ask the students if anything about their own completed collage surprised them (e.g., Did the students include themselves in their collages?)

### 3. Listen to Your Body

Marcus describes in detail the physical pain he experiences over his sadness at losing Lisa. Have students share their ideas about what it means to say, “Listen to your body.” Then to familiarize the students with the idea of listening to their bodies, ask students to think about how their bodies react to the following emotions and feelings: nervousness, excitement, and sleepiness.

Then invite students to join you in closing their eyes, sitting comfortably, and listening to their bodies for three minutes. Share with the students what your body told you (e.g., you are getting hungry, you feel tired, your stomach feels a little tight, something in your life is making you smile). Then have students share, in words or personal writing, what their bodies told them.

### 4. Watch a Move

The movie *Sense and Sensibility* is an adaptation of Jane Austen’s book of the same name. Have the students watch the movie and (a) draw comparisons of the two main characters, Elinor and Marianne, in terms of the emotions they experience and how they deal with their emotions and (b) compare themselves to Elinor and Marianne.

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*Crocodiles and Rivers*, Kate Ferris and Don Sawyer, Novels for Adult Learners

*Red Dog*, Louis de Bernieres, Oxford Bookworms

*The Perfect Murder*, Peter James, Quick Reads

*Chickenfeed*, Minette Walters, Quick Reads

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