

A GUIDE TO Nothing but the Truth

Avi

It really hit the fan today. . . . It's going to take a while to think out. Actually, I don't feel so great. In a way, the whole thing is stupid. But everyone says I was right. And I was.

—From the Diary of Philip Malloy

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Nothing but the Truth is a documentary-style novel that addresses such issues as relations among students, teachers, and schools; the complex nature of truth; and the exploitation of “hot button” issues by politicians and the media.

Setting: The present, Harrison, New Hampshire.

Protagonist: Philip Malloy, a lively ninth-grader whose humming of the national anthem in order to irritate a teacher becomes a nationwide media event.

Conflicts: The novel revolves around the external conflicts between appearance and reality, and between truth and individuals’ self-interest. The plot is set in motion as a relatively small conflict between Philip Malloy and his homeroom and English teacher, Margaret Narwin, roars out of control. New conflicts soon flare up: the external conflict between supporters of Philip’s “patriotism” and school officials; the internal conflict within Philip, caught between the public role forced on him and his personal needs; the internal conflict within Margaret Narwin, caught between her love of teaching and the resulting firestorm.

Resolution: The real truth about the humming incident is never revealed. The two main characters are forced into unfortunate situations by careless, uncaring people and by events that spin rapidly out of control. No longer comfortable at Harrison High, Philip transfers unhappily to a private school, and Margaret Narwin resigns from her position.

Themes: The truth is often too complicated to pin down in a single statement; people often ignore truth and fair play when their own well-being is threatened; behavior is motivated by many factors, some of them unconscious.

Of Special Note: The novel’s unique documentary style requires the reader to sift for the truth without the help of a narrator.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no comprehension problems to students reading on the middle school level. However, the documentary style requires readers to think critically and make inferences about the relative truth of each document, as well as to create meaningful connections between documents.

BACKGROUND

Documentary. In creating the unique format of this novel, the author followed the model of the “living newspaper”—a style of theater developed during the 1930s to dramatize social issues in an unconventional way, via speeches, readings, and dialogues.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Dr. Joseph Palleni, assistant principal at Harrison High School; somewhat unimaginative and inflexible.

Philip Malloy, the fourteen-year-old protagonist; talented runner and average student with a tendency toward irreverence. He vents his frustrations in homeroom and English class through small acts of defiance against his teacher.

Margaret Narwin, Philip’s veteran homeroom and English teacher; dedicated and compassionate but a bit old-fashioned in her approach to teaching; has a high reputation in the school and is generally popular with students.

Bernard Lunser, Philip’s original homeroom teacher; wittily mocks school rituals and regulations and so encourages irreverent behavior.

Allison Doresett, a ninth-grade girl whom Philip wants to impress.

Dr. Gertrude Doane, principal of Harrison High School.

Dr. Albert Seymour, superintendent of schools in Harrison.

Coach Jamison, Philip's track coach.

Susan Malloy, Philip's mother; is concerned about his work and well-being but has a rather superficial understanding of his situation.

Benjamin Malloy, Philip's father; troubled businessman and former track star who takes vicarious satisfaction from Philip's interest in track.

Ted Griffen, neighbor of the Malloys who is running for the school board.

Jennifer Stewart, education reporter for the *Manchester Record*.

Jake Barlow, radio talk show host who exploits the patriotism issue.

PLOT

Memo; Chapter 1: March 13. A routine item in a memo asks students at Harrison High School to stand at "respectful, silent attention" for the national anthem, **foreshadowing** the central **conflict** on which the plot will turn. We then meet the two main **characters**. Philip Malloy, a ninth-grader, enthusiastically reflects in his diary about his hopes for competing in track and his problems with his "uptight" English teacher, Miss Narwin. Margaret Narwin writes her sister about her decades of dedicated teaching and her problems with Philip, whom she likes but finds extremely irritating because he rejects "the idea that literature is important."

Chapters 2–5: March 15–20. Mr. Lunser, Philip's jokey homeroom teacher and a **foil** to the serious Miss Narwin, chats with Philip during the national anthem. The next day Philip is informed that he will move to Miss Narwin's homeroom for the Spring term. Philip doesn't bother to study for his English test, and the disappointed Miss Narwin gives Philip's mocking, disrespectful response to her exam question a C-minus. Concerned that she may be out of step with today's students, she applies for a grant to enroll in a summer program focusing on new approaches to teaching literature.

Chapters 6–9: March 21–27. In a **complication** in the plot, Superintendent Albert Seymour reminds his faculty and staff that the once-rejected school budget is coming up for another vote soon. In his diary, the most valid source of direct information about what this **character** feels, Philip reflects on his grades, particularly his D in English, and then goes on about his enthusiasm for track and his attempt to impress Allison by clowning around. The next day, in an important plot **complication**, Philip's coach informs him that his D in English prevents him from trying out for track. Stunned, Philip ignores the coach's suggestion that he do extra work in English to improve his grade. One evening Phil's parents discuss his recent moodiness. When his father tries to talk to him, Phil shocks his father by saying he may not try out for track. Privately Phil records his great disappointment about the track team. He is determined to

transfer from Miss Narwin's homeroom. He seems to blame her for all his problems.

Chapter 10: March 28. Now in Miss Narwin's homeroom, Phil starts to hum the national anthem, setting an important **conflict** into motion. When Miss Narwin reminds him about the silent attention rule, he claims Mr. Lunser had let him hum. Later on in English class, Philip provokes Miss Narwin with jokes about *Julius Caesar*. That afternoon, in a conversation with Miss Narwin, Mr. Lunser implies that he never allowed Phil to hum in homeroom, developing the **theme** of people's convenient disregard for truth in order to protect themselves. At dinner that night, Philip argues with his father about track; to change the subject, he brings up the humming incident without mentioning the rule about silent attention. Miss Narwin expresses her **internal conflict** in another letter to her sister, indicating her resolve to be "vigilant and *firm* as well as consistent and fair" regarding Philip. Later that night, Mr. Malloy, wanting to make up for past neglect, tells Phil to stick up for his right to "sing" the national anthem. Mr. Malloy's misguided support develops the **theme** of how behavior is influenced by unconscious motives.

Chapter 11: March 29. The next morning Philip hums again, and Miss Narwin sends him to Assistant Principal Pallen, who explains the rule about silent attention. Influenced by his father's pep talk, Philip claims that the humming is a "patriotic thing with me." He asks for a different homeroom, but Pallen doesn't bend the rules, showing the inflexibility of his **character**. That afternoon Principal Doane consoles Miss Narwin over losing the grant by telling her that test scores show she is the school's best English teacher. Philip tells his parents at dinner about being sent to the office, and his father vehemently tells him to stand up for himself. That night, Miss Narwin writes her sister that she feels validated by the principal's support, and Phil tells his diary that he is lucky his parents stick up for him. These two parallel documents, both expressing thanks for others' support, become examples of **situational irony** in light of what happens to each character later on.

Chapter 12: March 30. Philip hums again and is sent to Pallen, who demands that he apologize or face suspension. Philip adamantly refuses. Miss Narwin suggests to Pallen that Phil go back to Mr. Lunser's homeroom without being suspended, showing that her **character** is more attentive to students' needs. Pallen seems to agree but then suspends Philip for two days. Mr. Malloy decides to talk about Phil's problems at school to their neighbor, Ted Griffen, a candidate for the school board. Griffen's decision to bring in Jennifer Stewart, a newspaper reporter, introduces the **theme** of the media's distortion of the truth. Developing the **internal conflict** between his private needs and this brewing public battle, Philip tells his diary that he doesn't feel "so great" about this latest turn of events.

Chapter 13: March 31. Reporter Stewart interviews various school officials about the humming incident. Superintendent Seymour denies any knowledge of prohibition against singing the national anthem. Principal Doane is not aware of Phil's suspension or the rule; she evades Stewart's questions and directs her to Pallen. Pallen refuses to discuss the incident with Stewart, who then calls Margaret Narwin. The teacher tries to explain and then sends the reporter back to the principal. Confused, Principal Doane calls Pallen, who explains to Doane why Phil was suspended and then dismisses the problem. This little circus develops the **theme** of how people distort the truth for self-interest. **Ironically** unaware of the storm about to break, Phil considers asking Miss Narwin for extra work so that he can improve his grade.

Chapter 14: April 1. Jennifer Stewart's article in the *Manchester Record* focuses on the patriotism issue and claims that the school does not prohibit the singing of the national anthem. Worried about the election, Superintendent Seymour calls Principal Doane, who tries to minimize the incident. The Malloys are impressed by the quick response to their problem. Miss Narwin is distressed about the article's bias, but her sister reassures her that no one will pay attention. In a campaign speech Griffen expresses dismay over the district's attitude toward patriotism.

Chapter 15: April 2. Stewart's article is picked up by a national wire service, attracting the attention of conservative talk-show host Jake Barlow. Concerned about negative publicity, the school superintendent tells the principal, ". . . [I]t doesn't matter if it's true or not. It's what people are saying that's important," thus developing the **conflict** between appearance and reality. Principal Doane finally huddles with Pallen and Narwin to find out just what happened. Miss Narwin says that she sent Phil to Pallen for singing the national anthem loudly with no respect; she explains that Phil has been inexplicably acting like a "wise guy" in English. In his "strictly factual" summary of the incident, Pallen refers to the "silent attention" rule, Phil's "singing the national anthem in a loud, raucous, *disrespectful* manner," and his prior bad behavior in English class. Doane then interviews several of Phil's classmates to check on the story. Some say he was singing, some, humming. Allison, now disenchanted with the moody boy, says Phil was trying to get Miss Narwin in trouble. Principal Doane revises Pallen's account of the incident to emphasize Phil's deliberately provocative behavior. The various memos describing the humming incident develop the **themes** of the elusive nature of truth and of human behavior. Telegrams supporting Phil's "defense of free speech" start trickling in. Superintendent Seymour's memo of the incident expands the attack on Phil. Phil's parents celebrate the media attention, but Phil himself experiences **internal conflict** about how his classmates will react at school the next day. Griffen makes another

speech playing the patriotism card. Miss Narwin calls Dr. Doane, who expresses her confidence in the teacher but suggests she take a day off. Narwin refuses.

Chapter 16: April 3. This is Phil's first day back in school after his suspension. Narwin and the school receive more protest mail. A distraught Miss Narwin, who feels that the school is not supporting her, is angered to learn that Phil has been moved out of her English class. Allison tells Phil that she thinks he has been mean. Stressing the **theme** of the way self-interest distorts truth, the school district's latest statement is only a short, defensive memo to the effect that it supports traditional American values and does not prohibit a student from singing along with the national anthem. A reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* starts to explore Miss Narwin's side of the issue while a touchy Philip is teased about his fame. Superintendent Seymour tries to placate Griffen by blaming the whole incident on Miss Narwin's being "out of touch." When Phil approaches Miss Narwin about doing extra work in English, she angrily sends him away to his new English teacher. Principal Doane tells Miss Narwin that the superintendent wants her to take the rest of the term off; she is offended and hurt. Phil's parents are bewildered because he seems upset by his "victory," and they consider sending him to another school. As a result of his chat with the superintendent, Griffen makes a speech urging support of the budget.

Chapter 17: April 4. Miss Narwin takes the day off; Philip doesn't want to go to school either, claiming "The kids hate me!" After he leaves school early and refuses to return, his parents decide to send him to a private school. The St. Louis reporter interviews Miss Narwin, who says she's been asked to resign: "They say it's a leave. But . . . I'm not stupid." She feels unappreciated and betrayed and is thinking of resigning.

Chapter 18: April 6. In the novel's **resolution**, news items report that the school budget has been defeated by a large margin, but **ironically**, Ted Griffen has been elected to the school board. Miss Narwin calls the St. Louis reporter, only to hear that he did not publish his story about her and has shifted his attention to something else. In a moment of biting **irony**, we learn that the dedicated, misunderstood, misrepresented teacher has resigned.

Chapter 19: April 9. Philip is now attending a private school. His homeroom teacher invites him to lead the class in the singing of the national anthem. In the novel's final sad **irony**, Phil breaks down, explaining, "I don't know the words."

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is its unconventional **style**—its pulling together of many disparate, nonnarrative elements into a story. This style is particularly effective for developing the novel's conflicts and

themes, which focus on the nature of truth. Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Exploring the “Living Newspaper”

Students will probably be engaged by the novel’s use of the “living newspaper” style, in which many different points of view collide but none discloses the “whole truth.” How do readers decide what is true and what is not in this novel? Would students prefer a conventional narrator to this barrage of different perspectives?

- Take one “day” in the novel and rewrite it in conventional narrative form. Do you prefer it to the original? Why or why not?
- Expand one “day” in the novel by adding a few more “documents.” What new truths have you introduced?
- Create a “living newspaper” to present a school or community problem from different angles.

2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on other specific elements of the novel:

- Which **character** is most sympathetic? Rank the major characters from most to least sympathetic. Give reasons for the rankings.
- Is the novel’s rather bitter **resolution** satisfying or a letdown? Explain.
- How do the novel’s **conflicts** and **themes** connect with news stories, movies, or TV dramas?

3. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend ideas in the novel:

- What would students have done to resolve Philip’s situation if they had been involved?
- Research a political issue in the community. What was the problem, what was the outcome, and what factors decided it?
- The Harrison school district’s motto is “Where Our Children Are Educated, Not Just Taught.” What does the motto mean, and what would a school need to do to live up to it?

MEET THE WRITER

Avi (1937–), whose full name is Avi (pronounced *AH-vee*) Wortis, grew up in an artistic, politically active New York family. A learning disability that made it

difficult for him to write or spell accurately led to difficult times in school, but Avi persisted in his desire to become a writer and has achieved great success. Today he often shows children with learning disabilities his manuscripts, scarlet with editorial corrections, as a graphic way of encouraging them not to give up on themselves. A versatile writer with a lively imagination, Avi has written over two dozen books for young people spanning different types of fiction—including historical novels, sports novels, and mysteries. *Nothing but the Truth*, published in 1991, is a Newbery Honor Book. He refuses to take his success and acclaim seriously. Even after all the awards and praise that Avi has received, he tries to keep things in perspective and keep his sense of humor.

READ ON

Avi, *S.O.R. Losers*. A comic sports novel. A group of boys are forced to form a hapless soccer team, giving the author the chance to satirize the “thrill of victory” and worship of sports in American life. The novel has an equally comic sequel, *Romeo and Juliet—Together (and Alive!) at Last*.

Beverly Cleary, *Strider*. Novel. Diary entries trace a high-school boy’s struggle to deal with his parents’ divorce and his efforts to excel at track and field.

Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War*. Novel. A high-school freshman is targeted by school bullies when he refuses to participate in the school’s annual fund-raising drive.

Sandra Cisneros, “Eleven” / “Once.” A short story, available both in English and in Spanish, that revolves around mistaken assumptions and a girl’s attempt to reveal the truth.

Langston Hughes, “Madam and the Rent Man.” A classic poem in which two people disagree about the realities of a situation.

Arthur Cavanaugh, “Miss Awful.” A short story about an exceptionally dedicated but misunderstood teacher.

Paul Zindel, *Let Me Hear You Whisper*. A play that focuses on the conflicts between appearance and reality and between truth and the self-interests of individuals.

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