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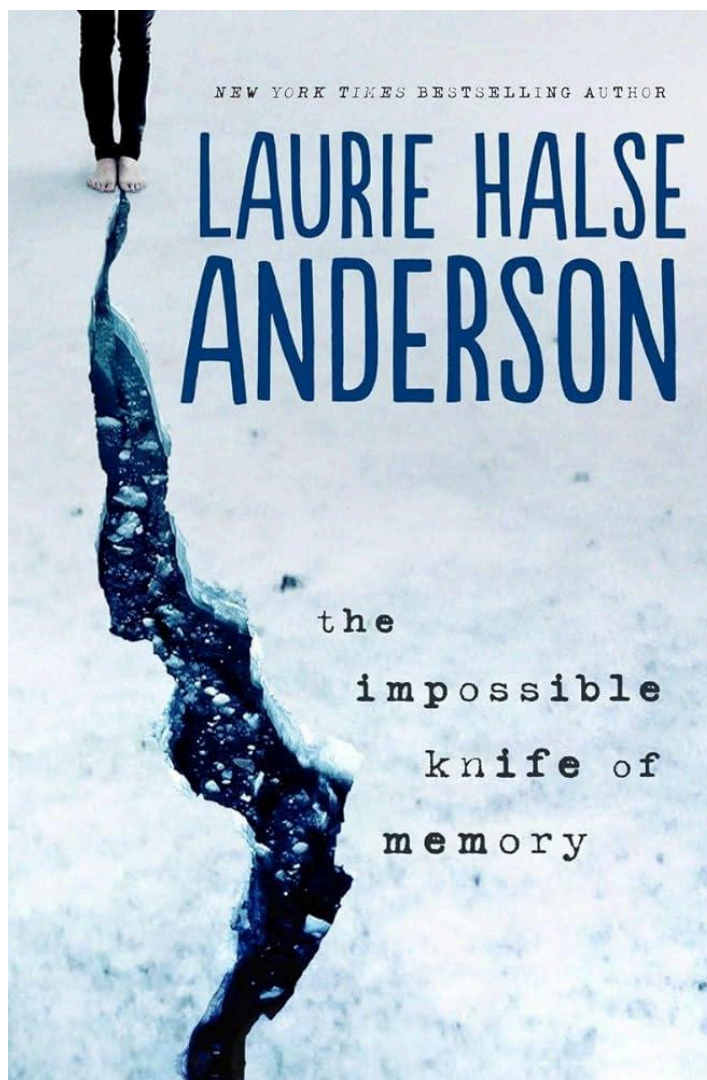
ENGL112B

Warner

27 October 2024

*The Impossible Knife of Memory*

By Laurie Halse Anderson



### About Laurie Halse Anderson:

<https://madwomanintheforest.com/>

Laurie Halse Anderson is an American author widely known for her Young Adult and Historical Fiction novels. Anderson grew up in upstate New York and got her degree in



Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University.

Experiences in her adolescence serve as inspiration for many of her Young Adult novels, including her first book, *Speak*. Anderson has stated that her sixth book, *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, has an emotional core in Anderson's own experience with her father, who was a World War II veteran that struggled with PTSD and alcoholism.

"Laurie Halse Anderson." *Alma.se*, [alma.se/en/laureates/laurie-halse-anderson/](https://alma.se/en/laureates/laurie-halse-anderson/)

### Summary:

*The Impossible Knife of Memory* follows Hayley Kincaid's senior year of high school, and her first year settling into her father's hometown after having been homeschooled while driving trucks with him for the past five years. Hayley's father, Andy Kincaid, struggles with severe PTSD from the four tours he took in the army, which causes him to emotionally lash out. To cope with the pain of his memories, Andy turns to drugs and alcohol, which only furthers the severity of his behavior and their effects on Hayley. Through a budding relationship and friendships, Hayley confronts her own memories and people from her past. Hayley struggles to balance healing her own emotional wounds with taking care of her father, surviving interactions

with the “zombified” students at her high school, and forming an idea of what life looks like after high school.

**Quote #1:**

“The tang of gunpowder lingered in the house so strong that I wondered if he’d opened a couple shells for the hell of it.... Spock and I went for a walk until the fumes cleared”(60)

In this quote, Hayley has come home and found her dad has been up all night cleaning his guns, which makes her wonder why he would be cleaning all of them at once– as if he thought he would need them. This is one of the first chapters that demonstrates how Hayley takes care of her father, as she cleans up after him and uses heavily scented products to cover up what he has previously been doing, therefore covering up the memories associated with the scent of gunpowder.

When Hayley’s secret jealousy of her “zombie” peers is revealed, the effect that having to take care of her father has had on Hayley becomes more clear. Hayley is envious of her peers because they are able to remember and hold onto a sense of childhood that she has long abandoned out of necessity, and refuses to remember in fear of what she can understand by recounting her memories with a more adult understanding of the world.

Hayley's visions of her father while cleaning demonstrates how Andy’s PTSD and alcoholism has caused her to have similar visions and trauma reactions as her father. Following this quote is a chapter from Andy's perspective in a memory of his fellow soldiers dying while he was on active duty, which exaggerates how Hayley has taken on a part of her father’s trauma.

**Quote #2:**

“I pointed at my father. “This isn't about Halloween or pants.” I pointed at Trish.... Maybe if my hair was still in pigtails, maybe if I was two feet shorter and missing my front teeth, then he'd see me.”(229-230)

In this quote, Hayley has stopped by her house on Halloween night with her boyfriend, Finn, to get a pair of sweatpants. Upon getting home, Hayley finds that her father's ex-girlfriend, Trish, who took on a maternal role when Hayley was young, was at their house. Because Trish was an alcoholic, and had physical arguments with Andy, which resulted in Trish walking out on them when Hayley was very young, Hayley has an adverse reaction to seeing her.

Previously, when Trish had sent Hayley a letter, Hayley tore up the letter and burnt it without reading it. When Hayley is confronted with reminders of her past, she destroys it or hides it as quickly as possible. This is in contrast to Andy, since he is constantly living in the past due to the memories he has of his tours. In this passage, Hayley is forced to come face to face with her past by seeing Trish. When Hayley is forced to confront her, she verbally lashes out, similarly to how her father has.

Because Hayley is used to the physical and verbal fights her father and Trish had when she was younger, she is surprised when her father turns on her. In this moment, Hayley is forced to face a part of her past from a more adult perspective, where she is suddenly in Trish's shoes. This part of the story is pivotal because even though Hayley loves her father, this proves that she is not safe from him because when he is angry, she is no longer a child in his eyes.

**Quote #3:**

“The good soldier swears to kill. Fire the cannon, mount the barricade, lock and load. Smell your brother’s sweat on your shirt.... The worst of it is seeing the sand sweep across the deep sea-blue of my daughter’s eyes.”(301)

This is the last chapter from Andy’s perspective in the book. In this chapter, Andy is recounting his memories from his tours, but providing commentary about the generational effects of being in the army. Andy describes his struggle to become clean of his own memories, and his inability to do so.

By emphasizing how little time Andy had to assimilate back into society in comparison to people in previous wars who had to return home by ocean, it’s easier to understand how Andy is struggling to leave the past behind him. By being connected to the military since his release, Andy feels like death follows him everywhere, as he hears about the deaths of his military family, and since the death of his mother and wife.

This chapter from Andy’s perspective is especially important because he acknowledges how his trauma affects Hayley. Andy’s entrapment in his mental state becomes more apparent in this chapter, because he can recognize how his PTSD has affected Hayley, but cannot stop himself from having episodes and abusing alcohol and drugs to cope with his memories. The sand Andy tries to clean himself of references becoming “clean” of drugs and alcohol as well, as he is unable to do so despite his best efforts.

**Classroom Use:**

In order to make sure students can understand the themes in this book, I would teach it in a ninth grade classroom. I would connect this book to possible wars that students would be

learning about in their history classes and take that as a gateway into talking about veterans. I want to use this book as an opportunity to talk about how seriously being in the military changes someone once they see active duty. I feel like it's important for students to understand this, especially if they're considering enlisting in the military after high school.

Since the chapters of the book are considerably short, I think that 13-14 year olds would find the book easily digestible, but 14 year olds would do better with the length of the book. I also think that ninth grade students would have an easier time understanding the contrast between perspectives and the allusions that Hayley and her father make to previous traumatic events.

If I were teaching this book, I would have students write their favorite quotes from the sections they read for homework. The way that Hayley describes things is very entertaining and I would like to highlight the aspects of the language that make it engaging. I find that Hayley's description of high school may be understandable from a teenager's perspective, especially one who just entered a high school, as Hayley has.

#### **Why teens should read *The Impossible Knife of Memory*:**

I find this book important for teenagers to read because of the various situations each character faces. Most students do not have a perfect family life, and having representation of divorce, substance abuse, and mental illness in families can help students feel like their relationship with their families is not entirely specific to them, and there are other people who have similar struggles. Although everyone's experiences are unique, each character has aspects of themselves that represent the perspective of high school students. Hayley's knee-jerk reaction to

pessimism is an example of this, as well as Finn's often snarky and avoidant responses to questions.

Students who do not face struggles described are able to better understand and sympathize with their peer's experiences through reading a book that depicts familial issues so blatantly. In middle and high school settings, empathy can go a long way in students' development socially and emotionally, both for the student showing empathy and the student receiving that kindness. This development ultimately prepares them to be more emotionally healthy as they become adults.

***How *The Impossible Knife of Memory* fits into *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*:***

*Chapter 4: Books About Real Life Experiences*

- Each character, including less prominent figures than Hayley and Andy, such as Finn, Gracie, and Trish are having issues that are common for adults and teenagers to experience. Seeing characters with common issues in books encourages teens to share their experience and understand that they are not individual in their struggle
- Hayley has interactions at school and is extremely pessimistic in a way that both appeals to teens of the same mindset, but points out how that mindset is flawed.
- Senior year of high school is a time of a lot of pressure for students, so having a narrative depicting this time allows students to feel understood about the possible stress they could be feeling. Avoiding discussing the future is something that some teens may be able to find commonality in, because they may be confused about where to go after high school.

*Chapter 5: Books About Facing Death and Loss*

- Helps students understand the trauma that experiencing death and killing others in the military has on veterans. Students can understand the severity of death and how it permanently affects people who witness it.
- For students who have lost a parent, they can understand parts of Hayley's story. For people who have not lost a loved one, they can begin to grasp how it affects other people whose parents have passed away, especially when it happens at a very young age.

**Quantitative Text Complexity Level:**

Lexile: HL720L

ATOS:

- Book Level: 4.7
- Interest Level: Upper Grades (UG 9-12)
- AR Points: 12.0
- Word Count: 83517

Dale-Chall:

- Score: 6.68
- Grade Level: Grades 7-8
- Age Range: 12-13

New Dale-Chall:

- Score: 41.3
- Grade Level: 5-6
- Age Range: 10-11 years



Flesch-Kincaid:

- Score: 4.9
- Grade Level: 7th grade ( Fairly easy to read )
- Age Range: 12

### **Qualitative Text Complexity Level:**

#### **1. Structure**

The story is in first person perspective from Hayley's point of view mostly with four chapters from Andy's point of view. The plot follows Hayley through her senior year, culminating in her father's attempted suicide. The seasons changing throughout the book allows readers to follow the structure of the novel clearly from the beginning to end of the school year. Hayley's narration is clear and does not hide anything from the reader, making it easy to understand and allowing the reader to trust the narrator. Since Hayley's narration is honest, her flaws are not hidden from the reader, which allows them to judge when they feel like Hayley's reactions are justified. The book is a fast read due to its short chapters and non-complex sentences.

#### **2. Language Conventions and Clarity**

Hayley's perspective is incredibly blunt and honest about the world around her, which makes her very easy to understand. Andy's perspective is slightly more complicated because it is made up of muddled memories. Hayley's commentary would be very easy for a teenager to understand and relate to, and the descriptions Andy conveys, though brutal, are comprehensible

to adolescent audiences. The violence that Andy describes would be most appropriate for audiences over seventh grade.

### **3. Knowledge Demands**

Hayley's language is typically referential to different cultural or historic events, which does not make it impossible for someone unfamiliar with these events to understand, but does make it more enjoyable to readers who have a previous understanding of Hayley's references. The text requires some basic ability to apply nuance when understanding Andy and Hayley's actions. Students who have loved ones who are veterans or have substance abuse problems may find this story more impactful. The novel also deals with themes like suicide that I think readers younger than eighth grade would have a harder time understanding. Since characters have various problems, like Finn's sister's drug addiction, and Gracie's parent's divorce, many readers can find parts of characters to relate to. Even characters who don't have experiences with familial struggles can understand characters like Topher as someone trying to understand the complex situations of the people around them.

### **4. Levels of Meaning**

Much of the text can be understood off of its first reading, but there is benefit to rereading the story with knowledge of the ending. By doing this, readers can understand what signs Andy was showing that would lead him to attempt to commit suicide, as well as the fierce loyalty in Hayley that would make her follow him out to the ledge in the quarry. Furthermore, The juxtaposition between Hayley's perspective and her father's perspective builds complexity in the text, especially when comparing Andy's chapters with what Hayley describes the the chapters

before and after his. Seventh to ninth grade readers may also find more meaning when rereading the book, because they may understand the characters more when they grow in experience.