

Dating Violence unfolds in
Breathing Underwater, 2001

Flinn, A. (2001). *Breathing Underwater*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.



The reader begins by looking into the courtroom on January fifth in Miami, Florida. There are two teenagers, one boy, Nick Andreas and one girl, Caitlin McCourt; five adults, one female judge, two lawyers and two parents, one for each teenager. A restraining order is granted to the teenage girl and her mother, and the judge tells the teenage boy he must complete six months counseling on family violence. The judge also tells Nick he must complete a journal during those six months explaining what had happened between him and the teenage girl to bring them to her courtroom. The rest of the book follows the young man through his counseling, his journal writing, his realization of what he had become and, while his life has changed, his renewed hope for his future free of his father's abuse and his own tendency for violence within a relationship. The last entry is on September second, Nick's seventeenth birthday, and gives the reader the hope that this young man's life will be better for what he has experienced in counseling and through his journal writing.

During the second reading of the book, it occurred to me that Nick is processing through the five stages of grief first introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book "*On Death and Dying*". The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. It is only by journaling that he is able to get past the denial stage of losing his relationship with Caitlin. By the end of the book he is able to take responsibility for his actions and come to accept his role in the abusive relationship.

Nick believes, at the beginning of this story that he is in front of the judge because he slapped Caitlin once with an open hand. The first mention of it is when Nick was sitting in the courtroom, unable to fathom why he should be there for "one slap, when she pushed me way too far. I never beat her up, would never hurt her." (p. 5) As the story unfolds, during his journal writing, it becomes apparent that Nick had beat Caitlin badly.

It is interesting to note that many of the times Nick sits down to write is shortly after he is angry about something. He sees Tom, his previous best friend, consoling and protecting Caitlin at school, gets angry about that and begins to write about his friendship with Tom. Another example is when he is at a gas station, sees Caitlin with another male classmate, gets angry and begins to write about that classmate. Much of this story outlines how Nick is able to come to terms with this anger. He learns to channel it through his writing.

His bargaining chip is the emotional connection that he and Caitlin seemed to still have for each other. Nick breaks the restraining order at school in order to get close to her and remind her up close and personal how strong their feelings were, put flowers in her locker for her birthday. He promises her he has changed because of the counseling.

The depression stage seems to take on many different faces in Nick's story. There are places in the story where he calls Caitlin, but does not talk. He just wants to hear her voice. Then he seeks her out to just watch her. Nick takes up a friendship with Leo, another person in the counseling sessions whose girlfriend was talked into dropping the charges. Later in the story, Leo, as well as the girlfriend, shot dead. Leo took out his aggression on his girlfriend one last time.

The title of the book, *Breathing Underwater*, and Nick's description of it, frames how he comes to terms with his behavior and begins to see the events that have happened between Caitlin and him more clearly. During an outing with friends to Key West he explains it like this, "Underwater was gray and bright at the same time. Breathing through a snorkel, all you can hear is your own snorkel-enhanced breathing in your ears. But there was plenty to see." (p. 172) This seems to indicate a time of tuning out all the extra noise in life and being able to see things more clearly than before. Nick begins to see himself for what he was, a monster.