Book report *A long way down*

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# General information:

Title: *A Long Way Down*Author: Nick Hornby  
Number of pages: 257  
Publisher: Penguin  
First published in: 2005 (by Viking)

# Summary

The story starts on New Year’s Eve, on top of Toppers’ House, a very high building. Martin Sharp, former host of a popular breakfast television show, is about to jump off the roof to kill himself, but before he gets a chance to do so, three other people show up: Maureen, Jess and JJ. They all want to take their own lives, just like Martin. They decide to tell each other why they want to commit suicide. Martin had sex with a fifteen-year-old a few years ago and therefore went to prison, causing him to lose his career and his popularity. The media are always making fun of him, so he doesn’t want to live anymore. Maureen is a single mother with a heavily disabled son, Matty. Because she constantly has to care for him, she barely has any contact with society and feels extremely lonely. Jess isn’t very clear as to why she wants to end her own life. She has some problems with her parents and her boyfriend, Chas, broke up with her without explaining why. Finally, JJ had always wanted to be a musician and was in a band with some friends, but the band quit and he doesn’t have anything to do or to live for. He doesn’t tell this to the others, because he thinks it will sound dumb in comparison, so instead, he lies and says he is suffering from a terminal disease.

Jess then proposes to go away from Toppers’ House and look for Chas so she can get her explanation. The others agree to do that, because it will prevent Jess from committing suicide. They eventually find him at a party. After talking to him for a short while, Jess realizes that she doesn’t need him to be happy, so they leave again.

They go to Martin’s house, where they find Penny Chambers, Martin’s former co-host and now, apparently, his date. Martin left in the middle of the date, so Penny is furious. When Martin fails to come up with a proper explanation as to why he left her and now came back with three strangers, she comes to the conclusion that he’s been dating someone else. She then leaves.

After sitting and talking in Martin’s house for a while, the four make an agreement. They will not kill themselves until Valentine’s Day, and when that day comes, they’ll meet again.

The next morning, however, the press has found out that the four were going to commit suicide. It is revealed that Jess is in fact the Junior Minister of Education’s daughter. He finds out about the suicide, too, and wants to talk with Martin. He gives him money to keep his daughter safe. Shortly after, the four meet again. They decide that the best option is to just stay quiet and wait until people have forgotten about them.

However, Jess wants to exploit the publicity the four are getting and calls a journalist. She tells her that they didn’t jump off the roof because they saw an angel and allows her to interview all four. She asks the other three to go to the interview and confirm her story. Maureen is opposed to this, because she’s a Christian. Despite that, they all go to the interview. They all tell the journalist that they saw an angel who looked like Matt Damon. Later, they admit that the story wasn’t true.

A few days later, JJ talks with Maureen about what she would want most. It turns out that she would like to go on a vacation, so the four go to Tenerife. The vacation isn’t a success, however. JJ meets a girl but due to the others, she breaks up with him. Moreover, Jess gets drunk and the police have to bring her back to her hotel.

Shortly after they return, it’s Valentine’s Day. They meet again on the roof of Toppers’ House, where they see another man who’s about to jump off. They try to convince him not to do it, but he jumps off anyway. Seeing this makes the group want to kill themselves even more than before, but they also realize that they wouldn’t be able to do it.

Jess decides that she wants to help the others to make their lives better. First, she visits Cindy, Martin’s ex-wife with Maureen. They try to persuade her to get back with Martin, but she has a new partner and thus refuses.

Jess then organizes a grand meeting at Starbuck’s. She invites Martin, Maureen and JJ and all their friend and relatives. Initially, the meeting doesn’t work out at all. Jess gets into an argument with her parents about her sister’s earrings. Her sister, Jen, disappeared some years ago and a few days after that, her earrings had disappeared as well and Jess’ parents accuse her of stealing them. Martin notices one of Matty’s nurses is flirting with Penny and starts arguing with the nurse. JJ gets in an argument with one of his former band members and goes outside with him to duke it out.

However, the meeting eventually turns out to be helpful. Maureen talks to Jess’ parents and brings up the idea that Jen may have taken her earrings herself. After that, she speaks to one of the nurses and he offers her a spot in a quiz team.

Jess meets a person who does not want to tell his name, because he believes names are only limitations. Jess sleeps with him and learns a lot from his views. She also talks with her parents and their relation improves.

Martin gets a new job as a tutor for children and gladly accepts the fresh start.

JJ solves his argument with his former band member and the band gets back together.

In the end, everyone’s lives have improved and they don’t need to kill themselves anymore.

# Characters

The characters are an important aspect of this novel. The book has four main characters and they’re all very different. They all describe small parts of the story from their own perspective, so that you get to know all four of them a lot.

Martin Sharp is a former host of the popular breakfast television show *Rise and shine with Penny and Martin*. However, two years ago, he had sex with a fifteen-year-old girl and went to prison. After that, he lost his job and his wife left him. He then started working for *FeetUpTV,* a poorly viewed TV channel, and after he arranges an interview for him and the other main characters and it ends up being a disaster, he gets fired. He is still as famous as he used to be, if not more. However, ever since he went to prison, he’s been famous in a bad way. The tabloids often write about him and call him Sleazebag. Because of this, he wants to take his own life. Despite being sad, he is quite humorous. In the beginning of the book, he compares his decision to commit suicide to emigrating to Sydney, after which he says: ‘Suicide was my Sydney. And I say that with no offence to the good people of Sydney intended.’

Maureen is a single mother of a heavily disabled son, Matty. Most of the time, she is at home taking care of Matty. Therefore, she rarely talks to other people. She also doesn’t have time to watch the television. The only place outside of her home where she regularly comes is the church. She is a Christian and the church is the only place where she has social contact. Despite all the trouble he causes her, Maureen still loves her son. When she decides to kill herself on New Year’s Eve and brings Matty to a nursery home for the night, she tells everyone she’s going to a party organized by one of her friends from the church. Even though Matty can’t understand her, she feels terrible about lying to him. ‘The moment I told him, I wanted to go straight to confession.’ Due to barely having any social contact, she is very shy and insecure. ‘They spoke quickly, Martin and Jess and JJ. Like people in a soap opera, bang bang bang. Like people who know what to say. I could never have spoken that quickly, not then, anyway: it made me realize that I’d hardly spoken at all for twenty-odd years.’ She is, partially because of her religion, opposed to swearing. All the other characters use swear words frequently, which Maureen can’t stand, especially when God or Jesus is involved. During the fragments when the story is told from her perspective, all swears are censored.

Jess is an 18-year-old girl. She is bad at keeping friends she makes, as she states herself: ‘I make friends easily enough, but then I piss them off, I know that much, even if I’m not sure why or how. And so people and parties disappear.’ She also has problems and conflicts with her parents very often. Because of that, she has a bad relation with them. ‘But when Mum brought up that thing about the earrings, I knew I might as well have dragged someone in off of the street and asked them to adopt me or whatever.’ Her older sister Jennifer (often shortened as Jen) disappeared three years ago. It is not clear what happened to her. The police thought it was a suicide, but Jess doesn’t believe that. This event has had a lot of impact on Jess, although she thinks it didn’t at the beginning of the story: ‘You won’t believe this – I don’t think I do now – but in my head, what happened to Jen had fuck all to do with New Year’s Eve.’ She is extremely impulsive and does and says whatever comes to her mind. For example, at one point, she says to Maureen, after she said that she had been engaged: ‘Did you shag him? I’ll bet you did. How did he like it? Doggy style? So he didn’t have to look at you?’ Another example of this is that Jess is the only one of the main characters who hadn’t decided to commit suicide before New Year’s Eve. She partially doesn’t even want to kill herself because she’s so sad, but simply because it’s something to do. JJ tells the reader: ‘It wasn’t that we thought she was really suicidal, either: it was just that it felt like she might do whatever she wanted to do, at any given moment, and if she wanted to jump off a building to see what it felt like, she’d try it.’

JJ, who is actually called John Julius, is an American who used to be in a band named Big Yellow. Ever since the band broke up, he has only had jobs like delivering pizzas and he wants to commit suicide because he doesn’t know what to do with his life anymore. He sometimes lies about himself. He refuses to tell Martin, Maureen and Jess his full name and he says he wants to kill himself because he suffers from CCR, because he’s afraid that his true reasons will sound dumb in comparison to those of the others. ‘And maybe I felt a little insecure because Martin had pissed all over my patch. I was going to be the shame and humiliation guy, but my shame and humiliation was beginning to look a little pale.’ Aside from having nothing to do with his life, he misses his ex-girlfriend Lizzie a lot. He also tries to make a new girlfriend during the vacation to Tenerife, but he doesn’t succeed. He loves music, although he hates the electronic music that some people, especially the younger generation, like: ‘They don’t like real music, these people. They don’t like the Ramones or the Temptations or the ‘Mats; they like DJ Bleepy and his stupid fucking bleeps.’ He also likes reading and considers himself more cultured and sophisticated than the others. ‘Suicide wasn’t invented for people like this. It was invented for people like Virginia Woolf and Nick Drake. And me. Suicide was supposed to be cool.’

# Personal opinion

I like this novel a lot. It is about a dark subject, suicide, yet the book is full of humour and doesn’t feel heavy at all to read. This is something I am a huge fan of and this book does it well. Another thing I like is how the characters are extremely diverse. Aside from the fact that they’re all suicidal, there’s almost nothing they have in common. Yet, the one thing that they do have in common unites them.

# Themes and motives

The most important theme in this book is friendship. All four of the main characters didn’t have any good friends when they met each other on Toppers’ House: Martin is hated by the public because of what he’s done, Maureen is isolated from her environment because she has to take care of Matty, Jess always does stupid things so that her friends don’t want to see her anymore and JJ lost his friends when the band broke up. However, the four eventually become friends and start helping each other, which cheers them up.

Another important theme is that you shouldn’t give up. At the beginning of the story, the main characters are about to give up their lives. However, they encourage each other to keep enduring their problems and because they do, things get better and they have good lives again.

# Time & Setting

The novel is set in modern time. This is obvious because of elements like television. More specifically, the novel is most likely set between 1997 and 2007, since Tony Blair is mentioned a few times and during these years, he was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The book is set in England most of the time. There also is a section in part 2 which is set in Tenerife, when the main characters are on a holiday.