Goodbye For Now Study Guide

*Goodbye for Now* - a novel by Laurie Frankel

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**Instructor Resources**

**Author Biography**

Laurie Frankel is originally from Maryland but now lives in Seattle. Her mother, Sue Frankel, was an English Professor at Howard Community College. Laurie and her husband Paul have an adopted daughter who is transgender. *Goodbye for Now* (2012) is her second novel. She has also written *Atlas of Love* (2010) and *This Is How It Always Is* (2017). Previously, Frankel taught literature, writing, and gender studies. She currently works with a non-profit organization, Seattle 7 Writers, which encourages people to take an interest in reading and writing and creates pocket libraries for prisons, food banks, and shelters.

In a Q & A, the interviewer asked how Frankel would feel about using a program like RePose. In her response, she discussed how she, much like Meredith, lost her grandmother. Because they communicated via email during her grandmother’s life, Frankel thought it might be possible to engineer a program to send her previously sent messages, and she was upset that a program like this didn’t exist. This experience informed the novel in a powerful way.

**Synopsis**

Have you ever wished you could speak with those who have passed on? If you could say your final goodbyes, what would you say? Would it be just as satisfying as talking to the real person? Is it even possible?

*Goodbye for Now* is a 21st century love story. Sam Elling, your typical computer geek working for a computer company in Seattle, Washington, challenged these questions with the use of artificial intelligence. Because he struggled with communicating with others, especially when finding a love interest, he created a way of finding your perfect match online. It indeed worked for him, when he was matched with the ultimate love of his life, Meredith Maxwell. Although the creation of his match making algorithm was made to find love, he ultimately turns to the technology in order to do the impossible: communicate with the dead.

Through hard work, Sam, Meredith, and business partner Dash make it possible to speak to the dead through emails and video chats. What started as comforting the love of his life turns into a highly controversial business: connecting the living with their dead loved ones. And although it was created with the best intentions, the world’s first “dead mail” creates difficult consequences for users. The business is called *Salon Styx* where you can RePose with a DLO,
or dead loved one. Ultimately, media attention focuses on the morality of their business, and these tech entrepreneurs are accused of exploiting the sorrow of others for their own profit.

*Goodbye for Now* is an emotional roller coaster of everyday struggles of life, love, and loss. It makes the reader question morality, personal choices, the limits of technology, and just what it is that makes us truly human.

### List of Main Characters

- **Protagonist: Sam**
  - **Driven** – Sam worked for a company in which he could relate with the ultimate objective, trying to find the perfect love match, therefore, he develops the algorithm which has the ability to find the most perfect matches. “His teammates were impressed... was thrilled with the algorithm, especially once he saw the proof of concept demos and how incredibly, unbelievably well it would work” (10). “Brilliance is never appreciated when your alive. After I’m dead I’ll be hailed as a genius” (155).
  - **Sympathetic** – “Sam couldn’t stand to see Meredith so unhappy...he was desperate to help” (35).
  - **Dedicated** – “Sam and his dad trialed and errored and messed with it until it got so good it took their breath away...” (64).
  - **Loyal** – Sam finds the need to uphold all of his promises, in order to keep the RePose users best interests in mind. He makes the promise to Josh to tell his loved ones, especially Noel, that he died, after his death. “Glad to do it...glad I could help” (258).
  - **Overachiever** – Sam feels the need to fix everyone’s problems, he doesn’t realize that some things are out of human control. “Sam? You thought you’d tweak the programming to make it save lives? To cure cancer? To cure old age? ...Yes” (277).
• Meredith
  o Sam's love interest and the inspiration for RePose
  o Meredith serves as a foil for Sam
• Dash
  o Meredith's cousin
  o Dash pushes for the creation of the business
• Livvie
  o Livvie is Meredith's grandmother
  o Her death is the impetus for RePose; Meredith's grief drives Sam to a grand gesture in an effort to comfort her

Setting

The setting of this novel is both physical and virtual. In a physical sense, the novel is set in Seattle, Washington. Most of the action takes place either in Livvie's apartment, which Meredith and Sam take over when Livvie dies, or in "Salon Styx": the physical space that Sam, Meredith, and Dash create for their users to come in and virtually interact with their Dead Loved Ones (DLOs). The virtual setting is harder to define as it involves the interaction of living characters with representations (projections) of the dead.

Conflict

• RePose vs. Media
  o CNN becomes combative with Sam over what they see as a manipulation of grieving loved ones
• Man vs. Death
  o The novel explores the archetypal narrative of mankind's attempt to avoid dying
• Technology vs. Nature
  o Another way to express that archetypal theme as in the case of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or the myth of Prometheus
• Sam's Internal Conflict
  o Sam is the archetypal tortured genius
  o Loss informs his life and he is motivated by his genius to try and heal this loss through his abilities
Symbols

- Projections
- Baseball
- Airplanes

Prominent Themes

- Knowledge
- The Possibilities and Limitations of Knowledge
- Love
- Healthy Grief
- Death and the Afterlife
- Ethical Use of Technology
- Private vs. Public Life
- Fear of the Unknown
- Isolation and Genius

Assignment Ideas for Students

Close Reading Passages

**Major Spoiler Alert:** Meredith dies late in the novel - this forces Sam to consider healthy ways of grieving versus trying to hang on in a virtual way to the love of his life.

- Sam has the ability to create this program, and once he does and they are all convinced that this will help others cope, there were negative aspects that came with the creation of the program, RePose. In the St. Giles hospital, the doctor was really upset that the terminally ill children’s parents were, “wasting time they had left” (174). This incident really makes Sam question whether he made the mistake of creating the algorithm in the first place. He really beats himself up about it.

When Meredith dies while shopping in the market for things that her grandmother (the projection) asked for, Sam ultimately blames himself for the death of his girlfriend. She wouldn’t have been in that situation if she hadn’t spoken with her grandmother, on the software that Sam created.
Sam has a heart-to-heart with the dying Josh, after Meredith’s death. Josh feels that it is better to not know that you are dying because you won’t suffer as much as knowing that death is right around the corner. “In some ways, Sam, Meredith was lucky...crushed by a roof is a hell of a way to go...but she never saw it coming at least...she missed the fear, the regret, the sadness in everyone else’s eyes all the time... I’m haunted” (260).

- The entirety of this book is filled with multiple deaths and losses. The most important aspect of death being how to say goodbye to those who are dead and move on after the death. Death seems harder for those who are left behind, the living. Goodbye for Now challenges how to deal with death.

- “You feel so bad for people in mourning but you don’t know what to say or how to help them...” (88).

- “We can’t cure death or sadness or missing, but we can soothe ...help people remember ...move on... we can help them feel better about the worst part of life” (88).

- When Sam and Josh have a heart-to-heart, Josh shares deep feeling about wanting to die, in order to escape the pain and torture he has been facing while fighting leukemia. Although he is the one fighting for his life, Josh still worries about the people he is leaving behind. “We email; we video chat; they keep track of my progress... so I can’t talk about any of this with them because I don’t want my projection to talk about it after I’m gone. I don’t want to make my mom to spend the rest of her life talking to me about dying” (258).

Throughout this book, the question of what is morally and ethically correct is questioned. Both Sam, Dash, and people opposed to RePose question the usage of RePose.

- “your company is profiting off of people’s pain, sickness, sadness and death...” (155).

- “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t... half are mad that we’ve invented immorality and gotten rid of dead. And the other half are mad we’ve forgotten immortality and ignored the dead” (158).

- Sam went through peoples’ emails in order to get the algorithm working, and also when he discovered that Penny’s husband was having an affair. “Looking through someone else’s things also seemed invasive and embarrassing” (122).

- When Sam decided to tell Kylie that her boyfriend was going to propose to her the night that he died, he found this information when looking through emails. Dash felt that Sam should not have told because Kylie wouldn’t be able to move on after this kind of news. “Who are you to decide what information she has access to?” (215).

Choices have consequences, and messing with the natural order of things is a choice that Sam makes in this book.
"More to the point, if Sam had never invented RePose, her grandmother would have been safely dead and thus would have never told her she needed olive oil and supplies... What killed her was Sam" (199-200).

"Don't apologize Sam. You've given me a remarkable thing. There's no cure for old, and there's no cure for dead, but you've gotten as close as humanity likely to come for quite some time" (272).

Throughout the book, almost every character is sad because they have lost a loved-one or they are sad because they are around all of the misery of people going through losing someone every day. With RePose, however, something is taken from them: they never really learn the art of losing.

For instance, Meredith was around all of these suffering people all day every day and it took its toll on her – “Meredith would hold their hands, hug them while they cried in her arms, sit and listen to them reminisce for hours...It made her sad and wrecked and weepy too" (142). And after Meredith saw the children in the hospital and their parents forcing them to use technology so that they can later have them with RePose, Meredith could understandably not handle it – “Meredith didn’t say much. She also didn’t eat much or sleep much. She mostly sat on the sofa wrapped in a blanket and stared out the window" (176).

When Meredith died, Sam was in complete misery and didn’t want to come out of it – "His users understood what no one else did which was that he had no desire to get over it, no desire to move on from it, no desire to heal or reconcile or achieve grace or peace or forgiveness or hope for the future. He desired to achieve perfect Platonic misery. And he was not that far off" (213).

How our lives might be mined for information is a key part of this novel. We all create public imprints of our private lives. Whether we realize it or not, our lives are giant data sets that can be used for the purpose of creating products - like dating sites or dying sites.

"The point was this exercise was five things: annoying, prying, cloying, embarrassing, and totally pointless. He didn't have any hobbies because he worked all the time which was the reason he couldn't find a date." (page 3). Sam's over-intensified efforts to understand the process of this dating tactic leads him to over-analyze and overestimate the simple power of conversation.

Another example is when RePose was just starting off at the Salon Styx. "Sam wrote up a list of yamas and niyamas, RePose do's and don'ts, the very first bold-printed fourteen-point one
of which was: FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THINGS HOLY, DO NOT TELL YOUR PROJECTION THAT IT'S DEAD!!!!" (page 117). Sam is able to figure out that telling the projection it is dead will make it loop on that topic since it had never been encountered before in their lifetime. After the warning and people still kept breaking the rule Sam had eventually made a workaround for the RePose to be able to handle a statement of this magnitude. His knowledge led him to not understand why people were saying that sentence, but he decided to use his intellect to try and make it not harmful to the program after saying it.

Fear both motivates and stunts the characters in the book. It keeps them from moving on, but it also motivates them to hang on desperately. It freezes them in time, like the projections themselves.

- When Julia and Kyle- Meredith's parents- first see the projection of Livvie and it tries to talk to Julia until she begs for it to be stopped. "'Make it stop,' Julia begged, barely a whisper, through clenched teeth" (74). Julia's reaction to the projection of Livvie leads her to become furious, but extremely afraid. She is not a person who is too up to date with technology, so seeing a recreation of a dead relative frightened her so much that she just wanted it gone and to run away from Meredith's house. The topic is never mentioned around Julia again until a while after Meredith dies, and she begs Sam to let Julia talk to her daughter.

Two-Minute Paper Ideas

1. Look at the last 3 text messages you wrote. What are you communicating about? Who are you communicating with? Are these the most important people in your life?

2. What do you think your Facebook/Twitter/Pinterest/Snapchat profiles say about you? Write a paragraph about yourself based on this digital impression that exists in the world.

3. What is a soul? Do you think all humans have one? Why or why not?

4. Is there anything scary to you about Artificial Intelligence? Why or why not?

5. What are examples of Artificial Intelligence that you use in your life? What do you think the best use of AI is?

Group Activities

1. Research the current uses of Artificial Intelligence. Find at least one article that uses AI in a way that is unfamiliar to you. Highlight important passages and be prepared to summarize this for the class. As a group, discuss how you feel about this use of AI: is it cool, exciting, creepy, etc.? Be prepared to say why.
2. Research the company Eternime. As a group, discuss what you think of this idea. Be prepared to share your thoughts with the rest of the class.

3. The evolution of technology is looked at in depth on The Huffington Post. As a group, read and highlight the important ideas of this article. Then discuss the ways that technology has changed in your lifetime. Be prepared to share ways that evolving technology has helped and hindered your lives.

4. With your group, read this article on emotional exploitation. How do you feel about marketing companies using technology to target you emotionally in order to sell you things? Have you ever personally experienced this? Be prepared to share examples.

5. With your group, check out this article on the benefits and risks of Artificial Intelligence. Be prepared to explain in your own words what AI is and how it can be used. What are some of the myths of AI that you believed to be true before you read this article?

**Companion Readings**

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

The Myth of Prometheus

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Art of Losing"

Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast*

George Orwell's *1984*

Aristotle's "On the Soul"

Immanuel Kant's "The Categorical Imperative" (*Exploring Ethics*)

John Stuart Mill's "Utilitarianism" (*Exploring Ethics*)

Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*

Isaac Asimov's "The Last Question"

**Media Resources**

"An AI-Written Novella Almost Won a Literary Prize"

Avatar App

Discussion: The real-life avatar app described in the video here will allow you to see/talk with loved ones similar to the way Laurie Frankel describes the experience of the RePose program in *Goodbye for Now*. While we can debate how we might feel about talking to our
dead loved ones (creepy/cool, etc.), **how would you feel about creating an avatar of yourself** that "lives" on after you are gone?

**60 Minutes Episode on AI**

Discussion: What do you think about AI robots like Sophia who can learn? Are there scary implications to this, or do you think this is a good innovation? Why?

**CNN's Inside Man: MorganBot**

Discussion: Would you want to create a "Bot" of yourself? What would be the purpose of doing that? Do you think this is actually a way for you to continue to exist after you die? Why or why not?

**Mostly Human: Dead In Real Life**

Discussion: Would you want to be able to text with a dead friend? What would be the benefit of that? What would be a drawback of that?

**Additional Articles**

- Artificial Intelligence Will Never Rival the Mind
- Augmented Eternity
- Life After Death?
- Why You Should Believe in the Digital Afterlife
- Living Forever as a Robot?
- Electronic Persons in the European Union

**Research Topics**

- Healthy Grieving Process
- Use of AI in Hospitals and Healthcare
- Effects of Technology on Our Personal Health
- Social Networking
- Uses of AI in Business
- How Law Enforcement Uses AI
- Tech-Targeting/Data Mining
- Digital Footprint
- Emotional Manipulation by AI
Discussion Questions

1. Was Sam justified in searching through others’ emails in order to make the program? Sam had to go through the emails of Meredith and Livvie to make the projection, isn’t this invasion of privacy? There were other times Sam looked through emails such as when he investigated the relationship between Penny and her husband, in order to see if he was cheating. Review chapter “Penny,” starting on page 119.


3. When Josh and Sam open up to each other, following the death of Meredith, what advice does Josh give Sam regarding the quick death of Meredith? Answer is found on page 258 of chapter “For Auld Lang Syne.”

4. There is a reoccurring reference to airplanes. What is the significance of airplanes to Meredith? Look on pages 279 and 281 of the chapter, “The Wall.”

5. What is so ironic of Meredith’s mothers career and interest in building and designing ceramics? Look at page 204 of chapter, “Rubble.”

6. Where does Sam's depression about RePose start?

   A. When they first walk through the hospital and see kids being forced to make an electronic signature. The visit to the hospital first begins on page 173 up until it is discovered David was putting up the RePose posters on page 181.

7. Why did Meredith seemingly start to talk to Livvie more than she had before?

   A. The stress of dealing with all the people about RePose put her in a low self-esteem, and talking with her grandmother helped her feel more confident. Page 152 is when Sam first talks with CNN about the process and "smoke and mirrors of RePose."

8. Are there any factors with RePosing that Sam never took into consideration?

   A. Plenty. He has clients with teenage girls who never truly speak their mind (page 135), clients who just want one session (page 132), and even clients asking completely random questions that have no electronic signature with the DLO (page 132). Sam never took into account the factor of people.

9. Why is it hard for Meredith to sometimes comprehend that she died?

   A. She is a computer program after her death. She as a person does not understand the concept of being deceased and "reincarnated" as an AI. Sam's dad explains it on page 226 and how she'll just go to her basic patterns until she actually is able to learn this concept.
Essay Questions

• Discuss the protagonist, Sam: what motivates this character, and ultimately, do his motivations outweigh the outcomes? Why or why not?
• Sam created RePose to give people a different way to grieve and be able to still see their loved one. Is the concept of speaking and communicating with your passed loved ones all that foreign to human history, or has it been done before, and if so in what ways?
• Compare Sam to Victor Frankenstein. In what ways do these characters mirror each other and in what ways are they different?
• Using Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "The Art of Losing," discuss the process of communicating with a DLO as described in the novel. In what ways does RePose help or hurt the grieving process?
• Explain the ways in which Sam's creation obeys or violates the rules of Kant's "Categorical Imperative." Is Sam's creation ethical? Why or why not?
• Discuss the personal and ethical conflicts you might feel about turning over the digital history of a loved one for a service like RePose.
• Explain the appeal of a service like RePose. How could it help and how could it hurt? What questions can it not help us answer?
• Do the characters in the book experience loss in a healthy process? What is involved in a healthy grieving process?
• Explain how technology like AI is both a positive and a negative in our lives.

Vocabulary

1. Virtual Reality
2. Artificial Intelligence
3. Video Chatting
4. Algorithm
5. Repose
6. Projection
7. Sentient Beings
8. Styx
9. Immortality
10. Personhood