

# Old Bones

Author: **Bill Nagelkerke**

## Synopsis

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Jamie and his family have just moved into a big, old house called Cloverly in the city, and he is not happy about it. Jamie loved his life on the farm and blames the move into town on Sue, his dad's new partner. Jamie resents Sue for the way she has intruded into his life with his father. The farm is special to Jamie because it is where he feels closest to his mother, who died during childbirth. To make matters worse Sue is pregnant herself. The thought of having a new baby brother or sister is less than thrilling for Jamie.

For weeks Jamie rattles around the rambling, old house. He has left all of his old friends behind and has no interest in trying to find new ones. Anyway, there is something unusual about Cloverly. Jamie senses a ghostly presence in his bedroom. The room is always cold, and he can hear strange sounds such as running water and trains – even though there are none for miles. Jamie has some experience with ghosts. His mother has appeared to him on several occasions. Jamie's curiosity is piqued and he vows to get to the bottom of the ghost mystery – just who is haunting Cloverly and why hasn't the spirit moved on?

Simon, the university student who lives in the flat at the rear of the house, is conducting some research on the area. He has heard rumours about a ghost but is unable to provide him with any details. Jamie is convinced that Marion, the 93-year-old who lives next door knows something. He desperately wants to talk to her. His opportunity comes sooner than he expects when he meets Ros. Ros knows Marion well and through talking to her Jamie begins to understand that it was no coincidence that Sue purchased Cloverly. Marion wanted Jamie living there because she needs his help.

Cloverly is indeed haunted. The spirit belongs to Charlie, a young boy who drowned in the river. Charlie was Marion's first love and for years she has been communicating with his spirit. But now Marion is near death herself. When she passes away she wants to join Charlie on the other side. This can only happen if Charlie's remains are found and his spirit is reunited with them. This is where Jamie comes in. He is eager to fulfil Marion's dying wish but he doesn't realise that doing this will mean risking his own life. Will he and Ros survive the adventure on the very river that Charlie drowned in, or will it also claim their souls?

## Text Type

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*Old Bones* is a fast-paced adventure mystery. It has broad appeal and enough ghostly action to keep even the most reluctant reader engaged. Although the story is told in third person point of view the reader is given insights into Jamie's thoughts and feelings. Jamie is a realistic and credible character. Many readers will be able to relate to the teenage angst that he experiences when his life is turned upside down. He has trouble dealing with the changes that are happening – particularly the move and his father's new relationship. Jamie feels like he has no control over his own destiny. However, Jamie works through these issues as the story progresses and by the end he is better able to accept his mother's death and the need to embrace change and move on with life. His relationships with both his father and Sue improve as a result of this realisation.

While Jamie's story is set in the present day, Charlie's takes place in 1922. The author expertly weaves Charlie's story through the main plot and the eighty-year-old mystery gradually unfolds as the story develops. Finally, the two plots intertwine when Marion's role in the novel becomes clear.

Themes include a love so deep it transcends life and death, the importance of acceptance, family relationships, death and its effects, dealing with change and moving on. Most importantly the novel raises the question of what really happens to a person's soul when they die.

## Sharing the Novel

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***The novel has been divided up as follows: Prologue and Chapters 1-3 (pp. 8-20), Chapters 3-11 (pp. 21-83), Chapters 12-21 (pp. 84-167) and Chapters 22-28 (pp. 168-219).***

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Wherever possible encourage students to relate Jamie's story to their own experiences and broader knowledge. Encourage them to study Jamie's character and track how he changes throughout the novel. Have them make inferences and predict what is going to happen next. Students should be able to identify themes and explain how they are developed in the novel.

## Introducing the Novel

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Study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Who is the main character in the novel? Where did he use to live? Where does he live now? Why does he feel unsettled in the house?
- What makes the main character suspect that there is a ghostly presence in the house?
- Who does the main character believe knows something about the ghost?

- What do you think the eighty-year-old mystery might be about?
- Why do you think the author chose to call the novel *Old Bones*?
- Describe the front cover of the novel. Is the illustration appropriate? Why/why not?
- Do you believe in ghosts? Explain your answer.

**Teacher reads the Prologue and Chapters 1-3 (pp. 8-20) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.**

## **Comprehension Prologue and Chapters 1-3 (pp. 8-20)**

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- Describe Jamie's dream.
- Why is Jamie more attuned than most people to things past?
- Who is Charlie? How old was he in 1922? Who does he live with? What happened to his father? Why do you think the author introduced Charlie into a novel set in the present day?
- How did Cloverly get its name?
- Who is Simon? Why does Jamie dislike him instantly?
- Why is Jamie so unhappy about moving to Cloverly? What other grievances does he have?
- How did Sue find out about Cloverly? What was unusual about the sale of the house? What information do Jamie, Sue and his father learn about the house from Simon?
- Who is Marion?
- What is Charlie's obsession? Where does he store all of his "treasure"?
- How does Charlie know Marion?

### **Discussion**

- Who do you think the ghost that Jamie has seen belongs to? Some people believe that children are more likely to see ghosts than adults. Why do you think this is?
- Have you ever seen a ghost or had an experience that can't be explained logically? If so, describe it.
- How does Jamie behave around Simon, his father and Sue? Do you believe that his behaviour is justified? Why/why not?
- Why do you think the owner of Cloverly decided to sell the house when it has stood empty for so many years?

**Students read Chapters 3-11 (pp. 21-83) independently before the next shared session.**

## **Comprehension Chapters 3-11 (pp. 21-83)**

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- Describe what Jamie sees when he enters Cloverly. How does he feel when he enters the room that will be his bedroom? Why doesn't Jamie believe that this is the same spirit that he has encountered in the past?
- What does Jamie notice about the girl walking past his house?
- What does Charlie discover on the beach that makes him scream?

- Summarise Jamie's list of grievances. Are they valid? Why/why not? Why does reading it reawaken his anger?
- How does Charlie die? Where does his body come to rest? What happens to his spirit?
- Why does Jamie have so much trouble sleeping in his new bedroom?
- Why does Jamie's dad encourage him to put memories of their past life behind him? How does Jamie react to his father's advice? What impression of Jamie's dad do you develop from this conversation?
- Why does Jamie believe that he and Sue are very alike?
- How does Charlie feel when he is separated from his physical body? Why can't his spirit move on? Why does Charlie feel such a strong need to return to Cloverly?
- Who was the ghost that Jamie first saw and spoke to?
- What is Simon writing his thesis about? What information do Jamie and his family learn from him about Cloverly and the surrounding town?
- What do Simon and Jamie discuss in the kitchen? What does Simon tell Jamie just before he leaves that piques his interest?
- How does Charlie feel when he retreats to God's eye? Who is he waiting for?
- How does the ghost make itself known to Jamie? Who does Jamie think the ghost belongs to?
- What does Jamie discover in the cupboard while he is tidying his room? What does he notice in the ceiling?
- Describe Jamie's first encounter with Ros. What does Ros take Jamie to see? What interesting news does Ros give Jamie about Cloverly's previous owner?
- How have Marion and Charlie both changed since they first meet?

### Discussion

- What does Jamie have against Sue? Are his feelings towards her justified? Why/why not? How do you think Jamie's father feels about Jamie's behaviour towards his new partner? Is there evidence in the story to suggest that Jamie's dad and Sue try and include Jamie and make him feel important or are they really only interested in themselves?
- Jamie expresses his unhappiness by being sullen and unco-operative. What could Jamie do differently that might help improve his situation?
- Describe Ros. Why do you think she is so interested in Jamie and Cloverly? What do you think her relationship with Marion is? How does the author create the impression that Ros knows more about the situation than she lets on to Jamie?
- Predict what is going to happen in the novel next.

***Students read Chapters 12-21 (pp. 84-167) independently before the next shared session.***

### **Comprehension Chapters 12-21 (pp. 84-167)**

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- What connection does Jamie make about Ros after he learns that Marion used to own Cloverly? Why don't you think Ros owns up to the accusation?
- Why hasn't Charlie left God's Eye? What does Marion tell him about the world? How did Marion know that Charlie's spirit had taken up residence at Cloverly? Why didn't Marion move into Cloverly right away? Why couldn't Marion grieve for Charlie properly? What does Charlie want from Marion now? Why won't he tell her where his remains are?
- Why is Simon so sceptical about the ghost stories?
- Why hasn't Charlie noticed the changes that have occurred around Cloverly since his death? Why is he so scared to leave God's Eye?
- Why is Jamie worried that Ros will no longer want anything to do with him?
- What does Jamie overhear Sue and his father talking about in the kitchen? What does Sue tell his father that shocks Jamie? What do you think the secret that Jamie's dad shares with Sue is?
- How do Charlie and Marion communicate when she becomes too old to climb the folding ladder? What motivates her decision to finally put Cloverly on the market? What does Marion hope will happen to her when she dies?
- Why isn't Jamie keen on rivers?
- What does Charlie worry has happened when Marion fails to return?
- Why does Jamie want Ros to accompany him to Marion's house so badly? What makes him change his mind about having her there? Why do you think Marion tells Ros to get Jamie to come back tomorrow?
- How does Marion's disappearance affect Charlie?
- What confession does Ros make to Charlie after their unsuccessful visit to Marion's? Why does Jamie feel angry and disappointed with Ros? What was Jamie's initial motivation for finding the ghost? Why has his plan now changed?
- Describe Jamie's conversation with Sue about his mother. What additional information do we learn about Jamie's ghostly encounters? How does Sue react to Jamie's story? What explanation does she come up with for why Jamie's mother's ghost may have remained on the farm?
- How does Charlie know that Jamie is different from the other tenants? What does Charlie hope that Jamie might be able to help him do?
- Describe Ros' dad. Why does Jamie wonder if he is really over his illness?
- Describe Jamie's first rowing experience. What does he learn about the sport? Why is he so pleased when Ros asks him to row with her again? Why is Jamie disappointed when he realises that his dad and Sue are too late to see him rowing?
- Why is Jamie so amazed when he realises that his room is warm? What does he feel compelled to do? What does Jamie see when he finally climbs into the witches-hat? Who does he see looking at him through the window?

- Why doesn't Charlie reveal himself to Jamie? How does he feel when he sees Marion again?
- What does Jamie tell his father to do before he leaves to visit Marion?
- What does Jamie notice about Marion that reminds him that she is a very old woman?
- Marion doesn't believe in ghosts. What does she believe in? What does Marion need Jamie to do for her? Why is it so important that Jamie act immediately?
- Summarise the story that Marion tells Jamie. Why does Marion believe that Charlie might be ready to leave Cloverly now?

### Discussion

- Describe Jamie's relationship with Ros. Why does it get off to such a rocky start? What do you think each of them sees in the other? What qualities or attributes do you look for in a friend?
- What evidence is there in the novel to suggest that Jamie's attitude towards Sue is softening? What do you think the reasons behind Jamie's attitude change might be?
- Marion has spent her whole life holding on to the past. She has not moved away from the area or had many life experiences (except for communicating with a spirit!). Her love for Charlie has meant that she never met anyone else, married or had children. Do you believe that Marion has wasted her life? Why/why not? What are some of the dangers associated with not letting go of the past? What lessons do you think Jamie can learn from Marion?
- Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

***Students read Chapters 22-28 (pp. 168-219) independently before the next shared session.***

### **Comprehension Chapters 22-28 (pp. 168-219)**

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- Why does Jamie believe that his task is small compared to the knowledge that he has gained?
- How does Marion's amazing story help Jamie put his own loss into perspective?
- Meeting Marion helps Jamie realise that he is not alone – someone else has had an experience similar to his. Why does this knowledge comfort Jamie? Why do you think his relationship with his father and Sue begins to improve from this point?
- What advice does Marion give Jamie about how to make contact with Charlie? What does Jamie do to show Charlie that he is interested in him?
- How does Charlie first make himself known to Jamie? Why does Jamie decide to talk aloud to Charlie? Describe what Jamie sees when he looks at Charlie. What does he learn about Charlie during their conversation? How will Jamie find Charlie's bones? Why is his mission going to be dangerous?
- Why isn't Charlie sad to be leaving Cloverly?

- What news does Simon give Jamie when he goes downstairs for breakfast? How does Jamie feel when he learns what has happened? Why does he blame himself? Why does Jamie rush over to Ros' house?
- What is wrong with Ros' dad? How does his illness affect Ros?
- What does Jamie's dad tell him about Sue's condition?
- Why does Charlie begin to have doubts about asking Jamie for such a big favour?
- Why does Ros believe Jamie's story about seeing his mother's spirit? What comment does Ros make about love that strikes a chord with him?
- What does Ros tell Jamie about the tunnels? Why is Jamie so adamant that they need to complete the mission during the storm? How does he convince Ros to accompany him?
- Why is the river running so high and fast? What instructions does Ros give Jamie to try and minimise the danger? How does Jamie feel when they are out on the river? What is the only thing that gives him comfort? What makes him think that there is an invisible rower in the boat with them?
- Why does Charlie have trouble locating his remains?
- Why is Jamie angry when he and Ros come to rest on the other side of the tunnel? Why does Ros start laughing? What makes Jamie think that Marion has passed away?
- Where do the police plan to bury Charlie's bones? Where is Marion going to be buried?
- When was Jamie's baby sister born? What is her name?
- What does Charlie have in store for Marion when the pair are finally reunited in death?

### Discussion

- What do you think would have happened to Charlie's spirit if Jamie didn't reunite it with his physical remains?
- What do you think Jamie has learnt from his experiences with Marion and Charlie? How will his life be different from now on?
- Will Ros and Jamie continue to be friends? Explain your answer.
- Identify an important theme and explain how it is developed throughout the novel.
- Identify an important relationship in the story. Explain why this relationship is important. Does the relationship change during the story? If so, what brings about these changes?
- Which event do you consider to be the climax of the novel? Why is this event significant in the story?

### Activities

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**Drama** – Choose an exciting scene from the novel and write a script for it. Remember to include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and then present it to the class.

**Character** – Imagine that you are a counsellor. Write a report for Jamie that describes his character. List his positive and negative characteristics, his motivations and any problems that bother him. Include recommendations on how you think Jamie could improve his life and make himself happier.

**Plot** – Create a flow diagram that shows 15 important events from the novel in the order that they occur.

**Writing** – Imagine that you are Simon. You have recently completed your thesis on Cloverly and the town. Write a chapter on Cloverly and its ghost.

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment on spirits and ghostly phenomenon. Formulate 4 focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of written, oral and verbal sources to gather your information and record the research process in a log. Present your information as an oral presentation, on a poster or in a report.

**Oral Book Report** – Write a review for *Old Bones* and present it to your class orally. In your review include information such as what type of book it is, a brief story outline, an analysis of the setting and characters and your personal opinion about the book.

**Static Image** – Design a static image that depicts one of the important themes presented in the story. You may wish to do a collage, use the computer or design a poster. Use words and images from the story to convey your idea.

**Debate** – Conduct a debate in your classroom. The moot is “Ghosts do exist”.

**Personal Effects** – Put together a collection of Marion’s personal effects from her bedside table, desk, treasure chest, personal papers and favourite things. Explain the significance of these items.

**Character** – Describe Jamie’s actions and behaviour in a particular situation that occurs in the story. Justify or criticise his motives in this situation.

**Poem** – Write a love poem by Charlie to Marion.

**Questions** – Write 10 discussion questions for the novel.

