



# THE LOVELY BONES

THE NEW YORK TIMES NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER



THE  
LOVELY  
BONES

'Sebold has given us a fantasy-fable of great authority,  
charm, and daring. She's a one-of-a-kind writer'  
JONATHAN FRANZEN, AUTHOR OF *THE CORRECTIONS*

ALICE SEBOLD



# ALICE SEBOLD

## Lovely Bones Teachers' Notes

*written by William Simon - NSW English Teachers' Association*

Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* is a memorable text that is seen as an elegy for the short life of its protagonist as is made clear from the outset:

*"My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair. This was before kids of all races and genders started appearing on milk cartons or in the daily mail. It was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen."*<sup>1</sup>

Despite its horrific subject matter, the novel never descends into melodrama. It is painfully funny, bracingly tough, terribly sad; it is a feat of imagination and a tribute to the healing power of grief.

Throughout Sebold's beautiful novel, she demonstrates how a vicious event can initially create havoc for the family's victim but ultimately it can also heal the growing gulf within a family and restore their strong bonds:

*"They kept sharing when they felt me. Being together and talking about the dead, became a perfectly normal part of life. And I listened to my brother, Buckley, as he beat the drums."*<sup>2</sup>

The novel is set in heaven, but this is not the traditional heaven we associate with Christian scriptures. Heaven is presented by Sebold's powerful imagination as an extension of each individual's desire and imagination. For the protagonist, heaven is filled with the accoutrements one expects of an adolescent girl including media magazines, a gazebo, a sympathetic roommate and lots of canine companions. For this teacher, heaven would include the latest Vanity Fair copies, endless photo-ops with Diana, exchanging bon mots with Oscar Wilde and stealing writing tips from Jane Austen. It would be a great idea to ask the students to describe what they would include in their own version of "heaven", without managing to offend their "religious" sensibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, Picador, Page 7

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, page 324



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From the safety of her new environment, Susie observes the lives of her family, friends and even the life of her killer. Being dead, she is also liberated from traditional constraints of time and thereby she can also reflect on important events from the lives of the people she observes. Aided by Susie's frank first person narration, in prose which is lithe, resilient and delightful, we, the readers, are able to travel to new imagined worlds and to reflect on the fragility and beauty of life.

Inventively, humorously, imaginatively and, through references to other texts (the film *Ghost* comes quickly to mind) Sebold, subverts the novel of self actualization since her omniscient narrator, Susie, is already dead. She does this through using fantastic elements such as her bodily invasion of the idiosyncratic Ruth. This allows Susie to experience lovemaking, something which was lacking from her own heaven. The narrator is able to reach a new level of maturity and insight near the end of the novel:

*“These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections – sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at a great cost, but often magnificent – that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a new way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events of my death wrought were merely bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future”<sup>3</sup>*

Ultimately, *The Lovely Bones* disarms the disbelieving reader and challenges us to re-imagine happy endings, to reflect on our own heavens on earth and to question traditional beliefs. An imaginative journey well worth taking!

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, Picador, page 320



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## Focus Questions

**1.** The narrative voice that is used in the novel by Alice Sebold is its most remarkable feature. Read the following extract from the novel's first chapter and comment on how the narrative draws the reader into its web.

*“My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair. This was before kids of all races and genders started appearing on milk cartons or in the daily mail. It was still back when people believed things like that didn’t happen.*

*In my junior high yearbook I had a quote from a Spanish poet my sister had turned me on to, Juan Ramon Jimenez. It went like this: “If they give you ruled paper, write the other way.” I chose it both because it expressed my contempt for my structured surroundings a la the classroom and because, not being some dopey quote from a rock group, I thought it marked me as literary. I was a member of the Chess Club and Chem Club and burned everything I tried to make in Mrs. Delminico’s Home Ec class. My favourite teacher was Mr. Botte, who taught biology and liked to animate the frogs and crawfish we had to dissect by making them dance in their waxed pans.*

*I wasn’t killed by Mr. Botte, by the way. Don’t think every person you’re going to meet in here is suspect. That’s the problem. You never know. Mr. Botte came to my memorial (as, may I add, did almost the entire junior high school – I was never so popular) and cried quite a bit. He had a sick kid. We all knew this, so when he laughed at his own jokes, which were rusty way before I had him, we laughed too, forcing it sometimes just to make him happy. His daughter died a year and a half after I did. She had leukemia, but I never saw her in my heaven.*

*My murderer was a man from our neighbourhood. My mother liked his border flowers, and my father talked to him once about fertilizer. My murderer believed in old-fashioned things like eggshells and coffee grounds, which he said his own mother had used. My father came home smiling, making jokes about how the man’s garden might be beautiful but it would stink to high heaven once a heat wave hit.*

*But on December 6, 1973, it was snowing, and I took a shortcut through the cornfield back from the junior high. It was dark out because the days were shorter in winter, and I remember how the broken cornstalks made my walk more difficult. The snow was falling lightly, like a flurry of small hands, and I was breathing through my nose until it was running so much that I had to open my mouth. Six feet from where Mr. Harvey stood, I stuck my tongue out to taste a snowflake.*

*“Don’t let me startle you,” Mr. Harvey said. Of course, in a cornfield, in the dark, I was startled. After I was dead I thought about how there had been the light scent of cologne in the air but that I had not been paying attention, or thought it was coming from one of the houses up ahead.*

*“Mr Harvey,” I said. “You’re the older Salmon girl, right?” “Yes.” “How are your folks?”...*



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2. Who was Susie's roommate in Heaven and how is her heaven different from the one found in Christian scriptures?
3. Who is the first suspect for Suzie's murder? Why is he a suspect in the first place and what clears him of the charge?
4. What can you deduce about the school English curriculum that Suzie is studying? You may like to compare this with the one at your school.
5. Outline Suzie's dreams on earth. Refer to the opening pages of Chapter Two for details.
6. Pretend you are a psychologist who has been asked to speak to Lindsay and assist her to come to terms with the death of her sister. Keep a number of entries that show Lindsay's emotional and social journey throughout the course of the novel.
7. How is the character of Detective Fenerrman presented throughout the novel? Is this a sympathetic, typical or 'atypical' portrayal?
8. Why do you think Buckley, Suzie's young brother, is the only one who can sense her presence on earth?
9. What is the importance of the tent which is being built by Mr Harvey in Chapter Four and why does Suzie's father assist him in constructing this tent?
10. When Lindsay kisses Samuel Heckler at the conclusion of Chapter Five, the narrator states, "*It was glorious. I was almost alive again*". How does this insight signal a change in the relationship between Suzie and Lindsay?
11. Choose an appropriate title for each of the twenty-three chapters of the novel and justify your choice.
12. The Salmons all choose different ways to mourn the death of their beloved Suzie. Students can work in groups and trace the journey that each family undergoes as a result of Suzie's death.
13. Mr Harvey, the murderer of Suzie is chillingly portrayed in the novel's confronting opening chapter. Keep a log of his subsequent appearances.
14. Chapter Six deals with the character of Ruth and how she begins to become a central figure in Suzie's 'life'. Can you outline some of the reasons why Suzie begins to find Ruth a figure of interest and empathy?
15. Examine Chapter Eight and suggest why it is so short in length, in comparison to other chapters in the novel.
16. When Grandmother Lynn arrives in Chapter Nine, the reader is amazed by the eccentricity and richness of this new important figure. What were your first impressions of Lynn and what do you think helped you to form these impressions?



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- 17.** Why is Mr Salmon so full of grief and anger in the novel's middle chapters? How do his grief and frustration manifest themselves in his professional and personal life?
- 18.** Alice Sebold sometimes uses flashbacks, in order to allow Suzie to comprehend what is happening in the present, even though, she is no longer an earthly presence. Find such a flashback in Chapter Twelve and explore its effectiveness. Could this information have been relayed to the reader in some other way that could have been equally as engaging?
- 19.** Compare and contrast the characters of Abigail Salmon and Ruana Singh, commenting on how different readers would have different opinions on these two intriguing women.
- 20.** Describe Suzie's memorial service in the cornfield (which took place a year after her death) as presented in Chapter Sixteen and its impact on you as a reader.
- 21.** A Chapter entitled 'Snapshots' can be found between chapters Sixteen and Seventeen. Why do you think this chapter was included in the novel and why was it named thus?
- 22.** What is your reaction to the near death experience of Mr Salmon?
- 23.** How is Mr Harvey perceived by Suzie, her father and the reader after the novel's first chapter? Does this original perception change throughout the novel?
- 24.** The last section of the novel is entitled 'Bones'. Do you think this is an appropriate way to conclude the narrative? Or do you think the novel should have finished earlier?
- 25.** Do you think this book might be deemed blasphemous by certain readers?
- 26.** Do you find the female 'voice' used in the novel authentic? In your response refer to specific incidents from the novel.
- 27.** Towards the end of the novel, Suzie invades the body of her best friend on earth, in order to consummate her relationship with Ray. Some readers have commented that this 'trick' has already been used in the popular romantic film, *Ghost*. Compare and contrast the two incidents and their function in the respective texts.
- 28.** Despite the fact that this book has sold millions of copies in the English-speaking world and has won numerous awards, some teachers and parents might find it too confronting and controversial for inclusion in the school curriculum. Compose a speech either agreeing with this reception or arguing against it.
- 29.** *Time* has called this novel "the breakout fiction debut of the year; a stiff cocktail of David Lynch and Judy Blume, served with a distinct chill..." Does this brief description of the novel coincide with your estimation of it?
- 30.** Find some reviews of the novel from diverse sources and compare how they differ in language usage, register and tone (if they do indeed differ). In this close examination consider the role that context plays in the composition of a text, such as a book review.

“ When all is said and done, killing my mother came easily.”

The opening line of *The Almost Moon*, Alice Sebold, October 2007  
The gripping new novel from the author of *The Lovely Bones*.