

PREFACE & SLO County Reads 2006
The Lovely Bones Discussion Questions Guide



LISTED BELOW ARE QUESTIONS YOU MAY CHOOSE TO USE DURING YOUR DISCUSSION WITH STUDENTS. YOU ARE FREE TO ORGANIZE YOUR DISCUSSION AS YOU SEE FIT.

In General

- 1) Focus on the main aspects of the book such as characterizations, settings, themes, time period, etc.
- 2) In particular, what did you like or dislike about the book?
- 3) Ask students to identify the main themes in the novel: Family; Friendship; Love; Grief, Rape; Murder; Redemption; Coming of Age. The discussion may flow naturally from student-directed comments.

Openers

- 1) Which characters are the most plausible? Why?
- 2) With which character do you most sympathize? Why?
- 3) What events are most plausible? Why?
- 4) Do the characters change or stay the same? Which characters change? How do they change and why?
- 5) How does the suburban location contribute to the story? How would the story be different if the events occurred in your hometown?

Heaven/Afterlife

- 1) What does Susie's "heaven" reflect about her life on Earth?
- 2) Susie's heaven does not have a moral or religious prescription. How does the author conceive of heaven in this book? What role does it play in illuminating themes of the book?
- 3) Susie's heaven seems to have different stages, and climbing to the next stage of heaven requires her to remove herself from what happens on Earth. What is this process like for Susie?

Rape/Murder

- 1) What are Susie's impressions when she sees Mr. Harvey in the cornfield? Why does she go with him?
- 2) Why does Mr. Harvey pull the Pennsylvania keystone charm off Susie's bracelet and put it in his pocket? What is the significance of the charm in the story and as a literary symbol? Why does the author choose a tiny bike, a ballet shoe, a flower basket, and a thimble as the other charms on the bracelet?

- 3) The police question Mr. Harvey after Susie's disappearance, but they immediately dismiss him as a suspect. At what point in the novel does Susie's father begin to believe that Mr. Harvey might be connected to his daughter's disappearance?
- 4) It turns out that Mr. Harvey has murdered other girls and young women. Why do you think he has managed to elude the police for so many years?
- 5) Why does the author include details about Mr. Harvey's childhood and his memories of his mother? Do these details make him seem more human? How does this make him more or less frightening? (Sebold explained in an interview about the novel that murderers "are not animals but men," and that is what makes them so frightening.)

Family Impact

- 1) Discuss how each member of the Salmon family deals with their grief. How does each experience loneliness and solitude after Susie's death?
- 2) Is Jack Salmon allowing himself to be swallowed up by his grief?
 - a. Do you think there is a point where he should have let go? When? Why?
 - b. How does his grief process affect his family?
- 3) Does Buckley really see Susie, or does he make up a version of his sister as a way of understanding her death?
- 4) How do Susie's parents help Buckley comprehend the loss of his sister? How effective is their approach? How would you share traumatic information with a young child?
- 5) How does Susie explain the "Walking Dead Syndrome" (p. 59)? Explain why Lindsey is the most vulnerable. Why doesn't Lindsey use her last name at the gifted camp she attends? At what point does Lindsey let go of Susie's death and begin living her own life?
- 6) Discuss whether Abigail's need to leave home is really related to Susie's death or if it reflects other issues in her life. Is Abigail's choice to leave her family justified? Why or why not?
- 7) How does Jack's life-threatening experience help him see the importance of moving on? How does his illness force Abigail to grapple with Susie's death?

Susie

- 1) Susie is killed just as she was beginning to grow up. ("I desired to know what I had not known on Earth. I wanted to be allowed to grow up" (p. 19). How does she continue to connect to life on earth? To her family, friends and Mr. Harvey?
- 2) How is Ruth an important secondary character in the novel? Discuss why Sebold includes the scene where Susie inhabits Ruth's body and fulfills one of her greatest wishes — making love with Ray.
- 3) Susie says, "I came to believe that if I watched closely, and desired, I might change the lives of those I loved on Earth" (p. 20). Do you think Susie had an impact on their lives in her death?

Tragedy

- 1) Alice Sebold seems to be saying that out of tragedy comes healing. Susie's family fractures and comes back together. Do you agree that good can come of great trauma?
- 2) Explain how you interpret the following statement: "Horror on Earth is real and it is every day. It is like a flower or like the sun; it cannot be contained" (p. 186).

Structure of Novel

- 1) The first-person omniscient point of view offers the reader insight into all of the characters. How does this add to the suspense of the novel? How does the point of view help delineate the overall theme of the novel?
- 2) What is the meaning of the title? Why do you think the author waited until the end of the novel to reveal the meaning of the title?

Literary

- 1) What are the themes of the novel? Does the novel reinforce values that you hold or challenge those values?
- 2) Is the narrator reliable or unreliable? How do you know?
- 3) How would you describe the narrator's tone? Why does the protagonist speak to you directly as the reader?
- 4) What is the significance of the opening image of the snow globe on Susie's father's desk?
- 5) Is the story told in chronological order? Are there elements of foreshadowing? Are there flashbacks? How does the order of events affect your experience of the story?

Closing

- 1) If you were having lunch with Alice Sebold, what about the book would you discuss? What questions might you ask her?
- 2) Have students create a list of questions individually and collectively that they could ask the author when she comes to campus Thursday, October 12, 2006, 7:00pm, Performing Arts Center. *Keep a master list of questions for your records so that you can send them back to the students electronically.*

One strategy for fostering discussion is to read aloud a quote from the book and discuss the passage. Several passages are highlighted below.

- 1) "I don't think I believed this (Mr. Harvey saying the hidden room could be a clubhouse) even then. I thought he was lying, but I thought it was a pitiful lie. I imagined he was lonely. We had read about men like him in health class. Men who never married and ate frozen meals every night and were so afraid of rejection that they didn't even own pets. I felt sorry for him" (p. 11).

Question: How do you decide when to trust your intuition and when to rely on reason? Susie is right about Mr. Harvey but she ignores her intuition and allows herself to be led by an emotion informed by reason.

- 2) “I could not have what I wanted most: Mr. Harvey dead and me living. Heaven wasn’t perfect. But I came to believe that if I watched closely, and desired, I might change the lives of those I loved on Earth” (p. 20).

Question: How does the idea that heaven isn’t perfect correspond to traditional ideas of heaven? How does the notion that heaven isn’t perfect coincide with the possibility of effecting change on earth?

- 3) “When the dead are done with the living,” Franny said to me [Susie], the living can go on to other things.” “What about the dead?” I asked. “Where do we go?” (p. 145).

Question: How do you distinguish between honoring someone’s life and clinging to the past? What might be the author’s purpose in presenting a heaven that allows for the possibility of unanswered questions?

- 4) “These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections – sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent – that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous body had been my life” (p. 320).

Question: Is it necessary or important to find the meaning of a traumatic event? How much can you influence the determination of meaning? Does the meaning of a specific event change over time?

- 5) “You don’t notice the dead leaving when they really choose to leave you. You’re not meant to. At most you feel them as a whisper or the wave of a whisper undulating down” (p. 323).

Question: Why are you not meant to notice when the dead leave you?

- 6) “My grandmother stepped back into the kitchen to get their drinks. I had come to love her more after death than I ever had on earth. I wish I could say that in that moment in the kitchen she decided to quit drinking, but I now saw that drinking was part of what made her who she was. If the worst of what she left on earth was a legacy of inebriated support, it was a good legacy in my book” (p. 315-316).

Question: Why do you think Susie came to love her grandmother more after death? Do you think Susie would have experienced the same change in feelings had she lived?