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LITTLE BONES

Sandy Bigna



Teachers' Notes

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	2
Author Motivation	11
About the Author	12

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SYNOPSIS

When the school bully gives Bones her nickname, she claims it as her own, because *bones are strong like armour and remain when no other part of you does*. Having drifted away from her friends, Bones spends most of her time alone, drawing and curating her collection of dead things, pondering the lives they once had. It's her way of honouring them. And it also helps distract her from the gaping hole left by her brother Nico's death nearly a year ago.

But when Bones somehow wishes the skeleton of a young bird to life, she soon discovers it to be a curse on her new friend, Bird. With the help of the *yappy* Tenny, who's just moved into her neighbourhood, Bones must find the strength to reverse the curse and say goodbye once more.

A gentle story about grief, friendship and courage, *Little Bones* explores the importance of belonging, unconditional acceptance and the power of *looking up*.

THEMES

- Grief
- Friendship
- Courage
- Acceptance
- Collections
- Hope
- Healing

WRITING STYLE

A gothic magic-realist story, *Little Bones* is a gentle yet achingly tender journey of grief and healing told in three parts. Sandy Bigna shares the story of Bones, a girl struggling to process the death of her younger brother almost a year ago. Feeling hollow and alone, she finds solace in her collection of dead things, preferring to sketch them and imagine the lives they lived than spend time with friends. Amid her grief, she finds a glimmer of hope upon discovering the skeleton of a tiny bird, which Bones inadvertently resurrects under the magic of the full moon. Bird, however, wishes to be returned to his previous state as he is not truly alive. Challenged by her fears but eventually comforted by memories and new friendships, Bones finds the courage to say goodbye. Evocative figurative language accompanied by powerful motifs of birds and light creates an innately touching story as haunting as it is beautiful. Together with ornate sketches of Bones's special collection, *Little Bones* is a quiet and important text for middle readers.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, examine the cover of *Little Bones*. What are you wondering? What predictions do you have about the story? After reading, come back to the cover. Who is Bones? What connection do the images on the cover have with the story? How have your initial ideas changed?

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- After reading the first verse, 'Outside', on p. 1, make predictions about the story's themes. What form might the 'predators' take? Why would wearing one's 'skeleton on the outside / like armour' be appealing?
 - Why does Bones claim her nickname as her own rather than let it taunt her (see p. 3)? After reading the text, discuss whether this name suits her.
 - Why does Bones 'want to stay invisible' (p. 4)? Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
 - How do the first two verses of *Little Bones* share how Bones is feeling? How would you describe the tone of the text so far?
 - Why is Bones's face always tilted 'down towards the earth' (p. 5)? How is this different from Nico? How are they similar? How do Bones's ideas about looking up change as the story progresses?
 - Why does this story need a character like Edie? How would it be different without her? What are you wondering about Bones and Aiko from the first few verses?
 - What connection does Nico have with birds? How do we know?
 - Why do you think Bones hears Nico whispering to her (p. 8)? When does she stop hearing his whispers? Why do they stop?
 - What does Bones mean when she says, 'Bright sparks of memory / photo-flick through me' (p. 8)? How do these memories affect her? What memories do you have that 'photo-flick' through you? Share with a friend.
 - As you read, take note of the illustrations included in the text. How do they help readers better understand Bones and her journey?
 - What snippets of information about Bones's home life are revealed early in the text? What is it she loves about her home with Nonna Frankie? Use evidence to support your ideas.
 - Bones says that she and Aiko 'stopped matching' (p. 9). Why does she think this? Have you ever felt as though you have 'stopped matching' with a friend? Why does this happen? Share in a journal entry.
 - Discuss why the author chooses to use parenthesis in the extract below:
 I know that Edie and Aiko
 would screw up their noses and say,
 'Eww, gross!' (Which somehow makes me like it more.) (p. 12)
 - Why, when Bones finds 'the husk of a cicada / clinging to the scribbly bark / of a tree' (p. 12), is she so careful with it? What does this husk represent to her? Why does it offer a 'hopeful glisten' (p. 15)?
 - We never get to meet Bones's mother – instead we get glimpses of her through emails and phone calls. Why has she gone away? What does Bones think of her mother's decision to leave? How does the excerpt below hint at a hopeful future for Bones and her mum:
 I imagine us
 lying on our backs
 with the sky above,
 blue as the eye
 of a bowerbird. (p. 17)
- Discuss Bones's description of her mum as a 'trapped bird' (see p. 17).

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- Why does Bones collect 'dead stuff'? Why does she find it difficult to share her reasons with Aiko? Why does Aiko find this off-putting?
- Why do you think Bones never wants to return to the dirt hills (see pp. 28–29)?
- Discuss Nonna Frankie's comment that we all make mistakes and it's what you learn from your mistakes 'that matters in the end' (p. 33). Why does Bones feel differently from Nonna Frankie about mistakes?
- Discuss the character of Raze. Why is he an important inclusion in the story, even though he is a minor character?
- Why is Bones so excited about finding the bird skeleton at the wetlands (see pp. 35–36)?
- What does the following reveal about Nico's character: 'Only Nico would care about a planet being lonely' (p. 39)?
- On p. 40, we are told that Nico died. Why are the circumstances of his death only revealed much later in the text? What can be inferred about his death in the lead-up to his accident?
- Bones says that her mum's 'mouth drooped downwards / even as she slept' (p. 41). What does this reveal about her mum's life?
- Why, when looking at the skeleton of the young bird, does Bones say, 'My heart bursts / at the tender curl of its toes' (p. 42)?
- Why does Bones so desperately wish she could bring the bird back to life?
- In a dramatisation, re-create the scenes in which Bones says, 'I wish I could talk to you. / I wish you were *alive*' (p. 43) and the realisation that the wish is indeed a curse for Bird (p. 56).
- What is the role of the *Encyclopedia of Moon Magic* in *Little Bones*? Why is it a necessary inclusion?
- *Little Bones* is told in three parts: **Exoskeleton**, **Hydrostatic Skeleton**, and **Endoskeleton**. As you read, take note of the definitions of each type of skeleton, and how the story arc in each section reflects the nature of its respective title.
- Why does Bird turn his head towards the sky (p. 67)?
- Throughout *Little Bones*, there are many references to birds (e.g. 'You're usually such an early bird', p. 68; 'we perched / either side of her, / like little nestlings' p. 85). Track these references, discussing their significance to the telling of this story.
- Tenny's character is refreshingly 'free as a bird' (p. 80). How do they help Bones on her journey of acceptance and healing? How and why does Bones's attitude towards them grow and change as the story progresses? How does this show her coming of age?
- Discuss the motif of bones and their 'protective layer of ... armour' (p. 89) throughout *Little Bones*.
- What does the photo of Nico in Bones's room share about him (p. 89)?
- How is Nico like Icarus, flying too close to the sun?
- How does Nico continue to encourage Bones to look up even after his death? How does the memory of him 'glimmer faintly' at Bones (p. 95)?
- How are Nico and Bird alike? What is the connection between them?
- Discuss the use of light as a symbol in *Little Bones*. As you read, take note of such references, making connections with the themes of the text.

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- How important is hope to *Little Bones*? What are the subtle signals of hope that Bones is gradually able to recognise?
- Why do Bird and Nico bring Bones back to the treehouse?
- During the verse novel, Bones often refers to 'Up, up, up ... down, down, down' (e.g. pp. 111–112). How is this an important motif in *Little Bones*?
- Why, when Bones looks at the ground rather than at Tenny climbing the ladder, does her 'blood [hum] with shame' (p. 112)?
- What is the significance of the flock of birds flitting by while Tenny is up in the treehouse (p. 113)?
- What is it about the treehouse that Nico so loved?
- Why doesn't Bones want Tenny to go into the dumpster near the corner store (p. 115–116)?
- Why does Aiko flash an apology at Bones 'like silent morse code' (p. 120)?
- When Bones asks Bird how he died, he replies, 'Mostly I just remember... / falling' (p. 124). How did you feel when you read this? Share in a reflection.
- Why, when Bones reads aloud from her animal bones book, does Bird look 'for a long time at an image of / a feathered bird / in full flight: / it's bold yellow eyes, / wings spread like an angel' (p. 131)? On the following page, Bones notices Bird 'searching the sky / as dark as a raven's wing' (p. 132). How are life and death represented in these two verses, 'Angel' and 'Catch'?
- Why, upon discovering the way to reverse the curse, does Bones say:
 My mouth is desert dry,
 as I look at Bird
 who
 (even though he's so small)
 suddenly seems to take up all the space
 in my vision. (p. 148)
- Why do you think Bones is so unsure about going into the forest and looking up at the tall trees? Why does she describe it as being 'filled with all the darkness in the world' (p. 155)?
- Discuss Bones's 'bony armour' that has tightened around her chest. Why does she fall asleep with 'shadows curling in [her] heart' (p. 157)?
- Why is Bones thankful that 'Tenny / really isn't like / most other kids' (p. 163)? Discuss the 'moon-silver fragments' about herself she shares with Tenny (see p. 165). How does this help her?
- Discuss the wisdom of Tenny's comment: 'No one wants to be a sheep.' Why does Bird say, 'Much better to be a bird' (p. 166)? What can you take with you from this part of the text?
- Why, when preparing to farewell Bird, does Bones say, 'every moment / feels fragile: / a bone about to snap' (p. 166)? Do you agree with Bones that it can be difficult to 'enjoy something' knowing it will soon be gone (pp. 166–167)? Share in a reflection.
- Discuss the significance of the following lines from 'Cage':
 despite being protected by the rib cage,

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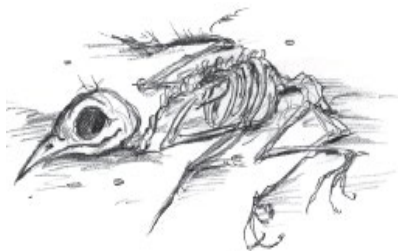
it seems that our heart
can still
quite easily

be ruptured (p. 169)

- In the role of Bones, write a recount of your 'Last Day' with Bird (see p. 170 onwards).
- Using the language features as a guide, sketch the scene depicted in 'Full Circle' starting on p. 172.
- Why is Edie wrong about bones and skeletons being 'creepy' (p. 175)? Discuss Bones's comment that 'The inside of us / is way more beautiful / than the outside'.
- How did you feel when Bird and Bones look up at the clouds and Bird says quietly, 'I can see ... a child's hand / putting a nestling into / a nest' (p. 176)? Why do 'the dark feathery wings' stir in Bones's chest?
- Do you believe Nico sent Bird to Bones (see p. 177)? Discuss.
- Is Bones being selfish for wanting to keep Bird? Why does Tenny say this? (See p. 189.) How does this affect their friendship?
- In what ways has Tenny been able to 'chip away / at [Bones's] bony armour' (p. 191)?
- How does letting Bird go help Bones to start healing?
- Bones wishes she could 'say something meaningful / to [her] skeleton friend / who has made [her] smile / and feel braver, / who has made [her] feel like [she has] a purpose' (p. 200). In the role of Bones, write a letter to Bird to share everything you want to say to him.
- How do the memories that 'come rushing, / white-hot as the stars / and almost unbearable' help Bones to start processing her grief (p. 202)? Why do the memories start to slow, turning 'dark-edged' and 'curling at the corners / like an old photo' (p. 205)? When have you used memories to help you? Share in a journal entry.
- As a class, reread 'Unbroken' starting on p. 204. Afterwards, share your feelings about this scene in a Circle Time.
- Why, when Bird says goodbye, is his voice 'blue sky after rain and / the slender arc of a rainbow' (p. 212)? How is hope reflected in these lines? How is Bird's release also a release for Bones?
- Bones has relied on her 'bony armour' but after saying goodbye to Bird, it 'falls away' (p. 218). Discuss whether you think her 'bony armour' helped, hindered or did both. Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- What role does guilt play in Bones's grieving? What would you like to say to Bones about this?
- Reread 'Light' starting on p. 219. How is Bones's voice different in this verse? How have the motifs of light and dark been used in this piece?
- Explain what Bones means when she describes herself as a 'broken jigsaw puzzle' that 'might not be quite the same / as it was before' (p. 220).
- Why, without her old armour, does Bones 'feel a burst of fiery courage', even though she is still aching (p. 222)?

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- What is the significance of Tenny giving Bones the table described on p. 104? How does this restored table reflect Bones's journey?
- Bones writes two acrostic poems about Tenny (p. 75 and p. 230). How are these poems different? Write an acrostic poem about the qualities of one of your friends.
- Discuss Bones's realisation that 'crying makes you feel / lighter inside' (p. 232).
- Discuss Nonna Frankie's character. Why does it shock Bones that Nonna Frankie's voice is 'rough, / coming from a place / that's the colour of bruises' (p. 235)? How does the scene of Bones and Nonna Frankie crying together on the anniversary of Nico's death show the importance of tears?
- How does making a new collection of Nico's things help Bones? (See pp. 237–238.) What are other ways you can honour the memory of someone you've said goodbye to, or 'see' them in the world around you?
- Reread 'Renew' on p. 239. How is this final verse the perfect ending to *Little Bones*?
- Discuss Aiko's character. How does she grow and change throughout the text? Why does she decide to change high schools at the end of the book? How do friendships change, especially towards the end of primary school?
- In the role of Bones, write an email to your mum sharing all that has been trapped in your heart over the past twelve months.
- Create a Theatre Tunnel by lining students up in two lines. Choose students to take on the roles of characters from *Little Bones*. As they walk through the tunnel, class members ask questions of these characters to further explore the text.
- In a reflection, share your biggest take-aways from reading *Little Bones*.
- Prepare and perform a monologue in the role of Bird or Bones. Use a suitable prop in your performance.
- Read picture books about grief as companion texts to *Little Bones*, such as *Mending Lucille* by J. R. Poulter and Sarah Davis (Lothian), *Molly's Memory Jar* by Norma Spaulding and Jacqui Grantford (New Frontier) or *Lucy's Bay* by Gary Crew and Gregory Rogers (Jam Roll).
- Discuss the way in which Bones refers to the fluttering in her chest (see examples below). How does this use of figurative language help readers to empathise with her? Why is this important?
- Throughout *Little Bones*, Bones sketches Bird. Discuss the way Bird's character has been injected into these drawings. Compare the first with the last image. How has Bird been helped through his time with Bones?



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- In a paragraph, explain the significance of the title *Little Bones*.
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language to *Little Bones* in further engaging readers. Identify the types of figurative language used, and experiment with these in your own writing. Examples include:
 - Cicadas scream in the trees
and the playground rings with laughter
and tears and promises (p. 2)
 - Her sly giggle
makes my heart fish-flop (p. 2)
 - The voices drop to whispers,
which curl into the air (p. 4)
 - Sun burns fierce
on the back of my neck (p. 4)
 - watching a lizard skitter-scatter
into a clump of yellow-dry grass (p. 5)
 - I hear a giggle
that scrapes at my skin (p. 6)
 - a familiar feathery fluttering
starts up in my chest (p. 8)
 - the fence palings are broken teeth
and the summer breeze
carries the smell of rubbish in the evenings (p. 10)
 - The scratched-paint door of our apartment
bangs behind me (p. 13)
 - A serpent tattoo slithers
down her forearm (p. 14)
 - A sick feeling blossomed in my stomach (p. 21)
 - she was now as far away from me
as Neptune is
from Earth (p. 22)
 - I curled away from Aiko
like a moon snail sheltering in its shell,
drifting along on the currents
far out in the ocean (p. 22)
 - voices sliding across the
still-hot late-afternoon air (p. 24)
 - Nico always picked ham and pineapple.
He said it tasted like holidays and sunshine. (p. 25)
 - That dark fluttering stirs in my chest (p. 29)
 - the dumpster [...] smells like old socks and overripe bananas (p. 29)
 - My bony armour tightens across my chest (p. 30)
 - My voice jolts out of me,
sandpaper-rough (p. 30)
 - My toes squelch in slippery mud
and slender gums gleam like exposed bone
in the last gold threads of sunlight (p. 34)

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- My heart hops
with anticipation (p. 35)
- A gang-gang calls out
like a rusty gate hinge (p. 36)
- My voice comes out
spiky as snakes' ribs (p. 37)
- the dark fluttery thing
bangs about like a grenade against my chest (p. 38)
- Moonlight slopes in through
the window (p. 38)
- My heart bursts
at the tender curl of its toes (p. 42)
- The air feels electric
with some sort of longing
I can't even name.
It's that crackly pent-up feeling
that comes
before a storm hits (p. 43)
- There's a bone-on-bone
crunch and clatter (p. 47)
- There's a pulse in the air,
which could be
the river-rush of my heartbeat (p. 56)
- Nico's whisper leaves a silver trail (p. 58)
- Bird and I jump
like startled jack rabbits (p. 59)
- *Flap flap flutter flutter*
go the dark-edged feathers
against my rib cage (p. 63)
- Soft birdsong falls
into the blue dawn (p. 64)
- There's a stretched moment of silence
as taut as a rubber band (p. 67)
- He smells like coffee and smoke,
and has crescent-moon shadows
under his eyes (p. 68)
- When Tenny says that,
there's a wing-flicker of light
inside me (p. 84)
- The question lodged in my chest
like a fishbone. (p. 87)
- Night slides in with its warm-scented breath,

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swallowing up the shrinking sun
and gently flicking its star-lights on (p. 92)

- my whispered words
momentarily
chase away
that feathery thing
always lurking
in the darkness
of my chest cavity (p. 96)
- I blink, standing still,
like a creature of the night
caught in headlights (p. 101)
- her tone's as bright
as the rainbow throws on the couch (p. 103)
- Snatches of their conversation

hover
like dragonflies (p. 105)

- I stand
like a tree taken root in the dirt. (p. 109)
- My chest wants to explode
from the thrashing wings inside

but I keep going (p. 137)

- the dark-edged wings unfurl themselves
inside me (p. 151)
- I can feel a shift in the room
like my words
have sucked out all of Tenny's energy,
which had sparkled around us,

leaving the air
flat
as a deflated balloon (p. 156)

- I still can't seem to hear it over the
sudden thrashing of the
beating wings
inside my chest (p. 160)
- despite being protected by the rib cage,
it seems that our heart
can still
quite easily

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- be ruptured (p. 169)
- I feel
 - a whining
 - emptiness in my stomach (p. 177)
- The silence feels
 - wishbone-fragile (p. 189)
- trying to sound
 - like my heart isn't splintering (p. 200)
- a memory glitters in me like a jewel (p. 211)
- His voice is blue sky after rain and
 - the slender arc of a rainbow (p. 212)
- The pain of the beating wings inside my rib cage
 - winds around my chest cavity,
 - which protects my rushing heart (p. 213)
- Tenny's voice cracks like
 - eggshells (p. 217)
- Sobs are pushing up from my chest
 - like salty waves heaving through me (p. 218)
- The tips of her fingers are scratchy
 - like tree-bark (p. 234)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Something in me is drawn to reading and writing about characters who are in that transitional period between primary school and high school, perhaps because I can still remember so clearly being in that awkward kind of limbo, and how friendships shifted throughout the year. The voice of *Bones* came to me first – and along with her voice came an image of a lonely girl who collected animal bones, and who was dealing with issues of loss and fractured friendships. I could visualise her so clearly – a girl dressed in dark colours, digging with a stick near water (which I quickly realised was the wetlands near where I live). I was a bit older than *Bones* when I went through a phase of wearing dark clothes and reading and watching books and movies with a gothic vibe, but I drew on these memories to shape *Bones*'s character.

I also find myself drawn to the exploration of loss and healing in children's books (perhaps because this was a topic I explored in my honours thesis). I think it's important for children to read about experiences of grief that also emanate hope, particularly to help young readers who have gone through loss themselves find comfort and know that they are not alone. Additionally, reading about experiences of loss can help young readers develop empathy and understanding.

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As I wrote *Little Bones*, I realised that I was drawing also on my own childhood memories of the joy of collecting things. There's something emotionally comforting about collecting things – it gives us a sense of security, purpose, connection. I collected various things as a child, including glass animals, snails and bugs. I was endlessly fascinated by the minutiae of the world of insects and discarded things – always picking up leaves, stones, feathers, interesting-looking beetles. I think sometimes we lose that joy and wonder that can be found in noticing the small things as we get older, and it was lovely to delve back into that headspace of observing the wonder of nature. Animal bones are especially fascinating to me, and I think many children feel this way – perhaps because there's something mysterious and secret about them, as bones are on the inside of us. They can teach us about both life and death.

The bird skeleton that Bones adds to her collection seemed to take on a life of its own in the early drafts, becoming a character in its own right. Adding this gothic layer of magical realism to the story provided a lens to examine complex issues in a unique way, and the bird skeleton became a metaphor via which Bones was able to work through issues of loss and grief, towards hope and healing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Bigna is a passionate supporter of local children's literature. She started up the Aussie Kids Books Instagram, which reviews Australian children's and YA books. She has studied children's literature at the University of Canberra and worked as a children's librarian in a public library. She has been awarded two Varuna Residential Fellowships and her YA manuscript *Exposed* was shortlisted for the HarperCollins Australia Matilda Children's Literature Prize in 2020. *Little Bones* is her debut novel.