

Teacher Guide for Lara M. Zeises's *Bringing Up the Bones*

Revised by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer

About the book:

Bridget Edelstein is taking a year off before she goes to college, to try to recover from the recent death of Benji, her longtime best friend-turned-reluctant boyfriend. Rather than accept support from her friends or family, Bridget turns to Jasper, a wonderful guy willing to nurse her broken soul—when she lets him. As she comes to terms with life without Benji, and the truth about their relationship, Bridget learns that being able to love deeply and truly is essential, even if the one you love doesn't feel the same. More importantly, she discovers that happiness pinned to another person is only an illusion—now it's time to find happiness on her own.

About this guide:

This guide includes discussion questions and projects intended to extend the use of the novel into classrooms, book clubs, and literature circles. It should promote discussion on the themes of the novel including friendship, loss, depression, grief and hope.

Author interview:

1. *What was the initial spark for this story?*

A good friend of mine from high school lost her ex-boyfriend in a crash very similar to the one in the book. I went to his viewing with her, to offer support, and was so surprised by how many people had come out to pay their respects. I knew the boy – he was very sweet, very gentle, and very young (only 19). I started thinking about how people process their grief over a tragedy like this when there's no one to blame. It ended up being a story more about Bridget's journey of self-discovery, but the accident provided that spark.

2. *Which is more difficult for you as a writer—the blank page or revision? Why?*

It used to be revision, because I'd work so hard to make every sentence "perfect" in my first draft. But all that did was make it impossible to cut even a single line without everything else falling apart. So, I learned how to write messy first drafts – to the college freshmen I teach, I refer to them as discovery drafts – and then really dig in on revision. I think that ninety percent of all writing is rewriting.

3. *What other young adult authors have most influenced your work?*

I read all over the map. I'm a huge fan of authors like Sarah Dessen, Megan McCafferty, Meg Cabot. There are certain books that have expanded my world – Paul Zindel's *THE PIGMAN* was the first book to ever make me cry; Blake Nelson's *GIRL* showed me how powerful a raw but unselfconscious narrative can

be; Francesca Lia Block's WEETZIE BAT inspired me to make better use of my imagination; Laurie Halse Anderson's SPEAK taught me that alternative structuring of a narrative can really affect tone and mood.

4. *Admit it. You constantly eavesdrop on teens to have that fresh dialogue appear in all your novels, don't you, Lara?*

I eavesdrop some, and I read a lot of teen magazines and watch a lot of teen-oriented TV shows. But I think if my dialogue sounds "fresh," it's because of my background in theater. I'm very conscious of how every word sounds – not just in dialogue but in narration too. Having the novel sound "right" is very important to me.

5. *What do you think Bridget is doing right now?*

I think she's finishing up her senior year in college and doing a lot of painting. I see her smiling. I'd like to think she finally learned that having a boyfriend is just a bit of icing on the cake, and not the whole cake itself.

Pre-Reading Activity

As a class, brainstorm the qualities that make a person best friend material. How are these qualities different than a typical acquaintance?

How would you feel if your best friend had to move away? What would you do the night before your best friend left? How could the friendship be maintained?

What do you think the title means?

Comprehension Check:

1. What steps does Bridget take in order to move on after Benji's death?
2. In what ways do Bridget and her mother lack the qualities of a typical mother-daughter relationship?
3. What is the significance of the book's title, *Bringing Up the Bones*?
4. Describe "the hole" and "the cave."
5. What object did Benji give to Bridget before he left for college? What is the significance of this gift?
6. Compare and contrast Mrs. Gilbert to Katharine. In what ways does Mrs. Gilbert treat Bridget as a daughter?
7. Summarize the scene in Battery Park.
8. In your own words, explain why Bridget breaks up with Jasper. Why does this break-up seem necessary?
9. Describe Bridget's shrine to Benji. Explain the significance of each item.
10. Name the Gilbert family members. How does Bridget describe each person?

Discussion Guide:

1. How do people express their grief? How does Bridget express her own grief? Do you think it is normal? How has Benji's family dealt with their loss?
2. Discuss Bridget's relationship with her mother. How is it atypical? Who acts as her primary caregiver? How does he keep the two connected? What do you think their relationship would be like without him? What incidences reveal the true feelings between Bridget and her mother?
3. On page 120, Jasper says to Bridget, "You're so strong. Your bones are so small, so fragile, but you're so damn strong. What's your secret?" What do you think he meant by this statement? Does it allude to the title? How?
4. Bridget clearly suffers from depression throughout the course of the book. In the beginning of Chapter 2, she provides a list of how her life has changed as a result of Benji's death. Which of these are clues to her mental state? Can you list major symptoms of depression in teens? How can you help someone (or yourself) if you suspect they might be depressed?
5. "The girl in the mirror is a stranger to me" (p.22) Why does Bridget feel this way about herself? Have you ever had a similar experience? When? How does this disconnection happen? How can it be prevented?
6. How does the sexual choices of Bridget offer a window into her state of mind and recovery? How do her actions and choices change over the course of the novel? What does Bridget mean when she tells Jasper, "If it was about sex, it wouldn't have to be you" (p. 96)
7. In order to explain why he likes the blues, Jasper says, "Something about the way it creeps inside you, makes your bones itch" (p. 51) What does he mean by this? Does music play a significant role in your own life? Does it make your "bones itch?" Do you think that music means more to teen than it does adults? Why?
8. What present does Fitz deliver to Bridget from Katharine? What does Bridget mean when she says, "Sometimes Katharine means well, but she never quite hits the mark?" (p. 70) How can well intentioned friends still disappoint each other? Is it more important to consider the intention of the friend than the act or gift? Or, do both matter? Why?
9. What is your opinion on Benji's break-up letter to Bridget? How would you answer Bridget's questions, "Which was more real? The tender postcoital declaration or the carefully scripted dispatch, the one he professed to have written and rewritten on three separate occasions? ...And then there's this: Does it even matter now?"
10. Compare and contrast Bridget's relationship with Fitz to her relationship with Katharine, using examples from the text. Do these relationships surprise you? How? Are they typical? Which relationship would you prefer to be in? Why?
11. Describe the relationship that Bridget has with Benji's parents. Do you think it is healthy for her? For them? Was there anything that surprised you? What?
12. Analyze Bridget's transformation in the last chapter. How does she change both externally and internally? What affects does it have?

Projects Across the Curriculum:

Language Arts/Vocabulary:

Use each of the following words in a sentence that shows you understand the meaning. Do not just copy the one from the book!

veneer (p.6)
plausible (p. 15)
frenetic (p. 22)
petulantly (p.32)
masochistic (p.34)
perverse (p. 38)
extricate (p. 57)
reproached (p. 65)
agnostic (p.81)
obtrusive (p. 84)
undulating (p. 85)
galvanized (p. 92)
proclivity (p. 106)
surreptitious (p. 122)
sequestered (p. 147)
innocuous (p. 159)
imminent (p. 161)
paucity (p. 173)
sordid (p. 179)
fervently (p. 193)
sequestered (p. 196)

or

Bridget explains her need of writing occasional letters to Benji. On page 31, she states "If I can't tell him what I'm feeling, then I'm not feeling anything at all." Write your own letter to anyone, living or deceased, and tell them how you are feeling today.

Math:

Research the statistics regarding the number of car accidents per year in the United States. Find the top five causes of car accidents (i.e., weather conditions, heart attack while driving, etc.), and make a pie chart or bar graph to display the results.

Art:

Draw a picture of how you think Bridget looks in the beginning of the novel, and then draw a picture of how you think she looks at the end of the novel. Consider her clothing, hair color, facial expressions, and posture. You may even provide the background of her room for greater effect.

Drama:

In groups of four to five people, have each person choose a different character from *Bringing Up the Bones* to portray. Ask them to consider how their character sits, stands, talks, etc. Then, acting as their characters, have the students complete the following sentences:

"I love _____."

"I hate _____."

"I am proud of _____."

"I fear _____."

Afterwards, ask each student to explain why they chose their answers. You may also ask them to support their action choices for their character.

Music:

In small groups, discuss the different emotional stages that Bridget experiences during the course of the book. Choose a different song for each stage, and explain why you chose them. Consider the genre of music, the rhythm and mood of the song, and the lyrics.

Debate:

Divide the class into two large groups. Have each half take opposite standpoints in debate of the following question: "Do today's teens act more or less maturely than the generation of their parents with the issue of sex?" Challenge each side to support their arguments with direct citations from the book.

This teacher's guide was revised by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, a reading specialist and author of *Sketches from a Spy Tree*. Visit her site, www.tracievaughnzimmer.com, to find other guides to great YA literature.

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