



## **Bog Child**

**Author: Siobhan Dowd**

David Fickling Books

ISBN: 9780385614269 (HBK)

ISBN: 9781862305915 (PBK)

Older Readers

### **SUMMARY**

The book opens in 1981. Sixteen-year-old Fergus and his Uncle Tally have crossed the border from Northern Ireland to pilfer turf in the south. What they dig up on their illicit mission is not merely a truckload of valuable peat, but the half-buried body of a child. At first everyone fears the body belongs to another victim of The Troubles.

This opening scene sets the tone for a complex series of misunderstandings that unfold throughout *Bog Child*, a book in which nothing is quite what it appears to be at first glance. The supposed murder victim turns out to have died 2,000 years ago, and may not be a child after all. The rope around her neck could be a necklace or a noose.

Fergus believes that the sealed packages he smuggles across the border each morning contain semtex, and implicate him in an IRA murder. The border guard is both his enemy and his friend. Meanwhile, his brother Joe languishes in Maze prison, half-dead on hunger strike protest. But will his death actually further the political agenda or is that, too, an illusion?

### **AUTHOR**



Siobhan Dowd was born in London to Irish parents. She spent much of her youth in the family home in County Waterford, then Wicklow town, but she spent her writing life in Oxford. Siobhan gained a degree in Classics at Oxford University. After a short stint in publishing; she then joined the writer's organisation PEN, initially as a researcher and co-ordinator of the Writers

in

Prison Committee.

Siobhan went on to be Programme Director of the Freedom To Write committee, based in New York, and during her seven-year spell in New York, Siobhan was named one of the "top 100 Irish-Americans" by Irish-America Magazine and *Aer Lingus*, for her global anti-censorship work. During 2004, Siobhan was Deputy Commissioner for Children's Rights in Oxfordshire. Siobhan was also a freelance writer and Deputy Editor of PEN International, a twice-yearly global magazine. She had an MA with Distinction in Gender and Ethnic Studies at Greenwich University, has authored short stories, columns and articles, and edited two anthologies.

Siobhan's first novel, *A Swift, Pure Cry*, was published in 2006 and won the Bisto Eilís Dillon Award. Shortly before the release of her second book, Siobhan sadly succumbed to cancer. The Siobhan Dowd Trust was established in her memory, with a mission to support the joy of reading for young people in areas of social deprivation. With *The London Eye Mystery* Siobhan posthumously won last year's Bisto Book of the Year Award. *Bog Child* was her third book to be released, and her final work, *Solace of the Road* is also available now.

## **READING JOURNAL**

*The suggestions below highlight some important things your readers should be looking for as they progress through the book. The notes they make will help them remember their changing responses at different stages of the book, which will be useful when they come to tackle the questions and activities featured on the following pages.*

### **Before you begin— THE FRONT COVER:**

- Take a good look at the front cover of *Bog Child* and note down what you think in your journal. You may want to think about these things in particular:
- What does the title suggest to you?
- What do you think of the image of the boy on the cover? What do you think it symbolises?
- What do you think of the colours on the cover? Do you think it is a conventional cover for a children's book? What do you expect from the book on the basis of the colour, image and the short description?

### **Part 1 – FIRST LIGHT (chapters 1 – 14)**

- Why do you think Siobhan Dowd chose this as the title for the first section?
- Siobhan Dowd has chosen “Ireland, near the south-north border, 1981” as the setting for her novel. What do you expect from this book based on this information?
- What are your first impressions of Fergus as a character? Can you empathise with him in any way?
- What do you expect to happen to Fergus’ brother? What do you expect will happen with the mysterious packages?

### **Part 2 – SECOND SIGHT (chapters 15 – 29)**

- Why do you think Siobhan Dowd chose this as the title for the second section? Do you think it is apt?
- The reader is gaining more insight into the vulnerabilities of the characters. What do you think these are for each character?
- What is the significance of the religion and nationality of the soldier Owain? Which other characters in this town have more complex identities?

### **Part 3 – FIGHT OR FLIGHT (chapters 30 - 47)**

- Why do you think this is a good title for the final section? Do you think she is preparing the reader for a fight or flight?
- Do you think the style has changed between the 3 sections? What is different between them? Why do you think Dowd has split it in this way?
- Is this how you expected the book to end? Do you think the ending is optimistic, pessimistic or realistic? How do you feel about Fergus leaving Ireland?

### **QUESTIONS**

1. The titles of each section rhyme with each other. Do you think the titles relate well together? Is there an ongoing theme?
2. Do you think the writer is objective in dealing with the religious and political backdrop of the story?

3. Does it surprise you that Siobhan Dowd is not from Northern Ireland? How well does she convey the language, accent, etc...? Is it an accurate representation?
4. A review in the latest issue of *Inis* magazine contains the criticism that "in *Bog Child* the reality evaded was the necessity of familial and community loyalty in support of the Northern Ireland Hunger Strikers". Do you agree with this view? Why?
5. There are lots of different plot strands in this book. Which is your favourite? How do you think they work in different ways? For example, the mysterious packages provide tension, drama and pace. Are there any elements to the narrative that you particularly like or dislike?
6. Two narrative 'voices' are featured in this book. Can you identify them? What are the similarities and differences between them? What effect do you think this technique has overall?
7. Dowd uses nature, the landscape and the sea as symbolic devices, but these symbols represent different things to the different characters. For example, the sea represents death to Uncle Tally, but not to Fergus. What does it mean to Fergus? What other symbols and images appear and what effect do they have on the individuals involved?
8. Discuss the idea of sacrifice and how it features in different ways in the novel.

## **ACTIVITIES**








1. The two teams of archaeologists in the book have very different views on Mel's origins and history. Research the phenomenon of bog bodies online. Based on your own findings, which theory do you support? Set out your work as if presenting your arguments to a panel of experts. Include pictures and diagrams to support your case.
2. Do you think *Bog Child* would make a good film? Imagine you are pitching the idea to a Hollywood producer. What elements of the story/ important scenes would you pick out to discuss. Using Worksheet E to structure your work, draw out the storyboard for a crucial moment in the plot (i.e. when the body is first discovered and no-one knows when or where it's from).

3. *Bog Child* deals with some serious issues, but at times the banter between Fergus and his friend Padraig offers some light relief. Think of some of your own favourite jokes and then write out new dialogue for a scene from the book, such as Fergus and Padraig's night in the pub. Include your own jibes and punch-lines.
4. As the story progresses, more information is revealed about Mel's appearance. As her face and body are excavated and uncovered, Fergus also imagines with increasing detail what Mel was like when she was alive 2,000 years ago. Study the pictures of the different real-life bog bodies featured on [Worksheet F](#) and choose one of the examples. Begin by simply describing what you see in the picture. Next, try and imagine what kind of person he/she may have been in real life. What was his/ her name? How did he/she end up in the bog all those years ago?
5. \*\*NB. Another good description of a bog body can be found in Seamus Heaney's poem *The Tollund Man*. See: <http://www.tollundman.dk/heaney.asp>
6. Do you think Siobhan Dowd surprises the reader with the ending? Think of an alternate ending and write a new concluding chapter.
7. Imagine you are one of the characters. Write a letter to someone important to you, imagining a scenario beyond the final chapter of *Bog Child*. For example, Fergus might write a letter to Cora while he is at university, or Fergus' mother might write to him about his brother's condition.
8. Imagine it is five years on from the point at which the novel closes. Fergus returns home after finishing his medical degree. How have things changed for his friends and family? What is life like in the village? Keep in mind it is 1986 and the Troubles would still be underway.

## **Worksheet E – Bog Child - Movie Storyboard**

*NB. A storyboard is drawn up at an early stage of film development. It helps the director plan out how each scene will work, so that when the actors and crew are on location he/ she has a visual reference point to help guide the day's shoot. It works kind of like a cartoon strip, showing the action progression from the camera's point of view. A brief description or dialog excerpt is often featured beneath each box frame.*

### **Scene Title:**

### **BOG CHILD – THE MOVIE**

**Actor Suggestions:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Director Suggestions:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Music Suggestions:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Worksheet F – Bog Child - Real Life Bog Bodies**

