

the lovely bones

by alice sebold · Language: EN

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Overview

"The Lovely Bones" by Alice Sebold tells the haunting story of fourteen-year-old Susie Salmon, who is raped and murdered by her neighbor, George Harvey, in December 1973. The narrative unfolds from Susie's perspective in her personal heaven, a place that is both beautiful and ever-changing, reflecting her desires and the needs of those she watches on Earth. From this vantage point, Susie observes the profound ripple effects of her death on her family and friends, as they grapple with grief, loss, and the desperate search for justice. Her heaven is a liminal space, allowing her to witness the slow unraveling of her family, the deterioration of her parents' marriage, and her siblings' attempts to cope with an unimaginable tragedy.

Susie's primary struggle in the afterlife is to reconcile her own desire for peace with her longing for her killer to be caught and for her family to heal. She watches her father, Jack, become consumed by the need to find her murderer, often suspecting the wrong people before eventually narrowing in on Harvey. Her mother, Abigail, retreats into herself, eventually leaving the family to find her own way to cope. Her siblings, Lindsey and Buckley, grow up under the shadow of their sister's death, each finding their own path to adulthood and understanding. The novel explores themes of grief, justice, memory, and the enduring power of love, even beyond death.

The book is significant for its unique narrative structure, offering a perspective from beyond the grave that is both ethereal and deeply human. It delves into the psychological impact of trauma on a family and the slow, agonizing process of healing. Sebold masterfully balances the horrific nature of Susie's death with the beauty of her afterlife and the persistent hope for closure and connection. It's a poignant exploration of how a single act of violence can forever alter the lives of many, and how even from a distance, love and longing can shape destinies.

Key Takeaways

- Grief is a complex and multifaceted process that manifests differently in each individual.
- The search for justice can be both a driving force and a destructive obsession for those left behind.
- Even in the face of unimaginable tragedy, human connections and love can endure and offer solace.
- Life continues for the living, even as they carry the weight of loss and memory.

- Closure is not always a definitive event but often a gradual acceptance and integration of loss.
- The novel offers a unique perspective on death and the afterlife, challenging conventional notions of both.
- The ripple effects of violence extend far beyond the immediate victim, impacting an entire community.

Chapter Summaries

The Afterlife Begins

Susie Salmon is murdered by her neighbor, George Harvey, and finds herself in her own personal heaven. She recounts the details of her death and begins to observe her family's immediate reactions to her disappearance, struggling to comprehend her new reality and the profound loss she has experienced. From her unique vantage point, Susie grapples with the sudden, violent end to her young life and the dawning realization of her new, ethereal existence.

A Family in Turmoil

Susie watches her family grapple with her absence. Her father, Jack, becomes consumed by grief and the desperate need to find her killer, while her mother, Abigail, retreats emotionally. Lindsey, her younger sister, tries to maintain a semblance of normalcy, and Buckley, her younger brother, struggles with the concept of his sister being gone. Susie observes their individual struggles and the growing cracks in their family unit.

The Investigation and Suspicions

Detective Fenerman investigates Susie's disappearance, eventually finding evidence that confirms her death. Jack becomes increasingly convinced that George Harvey is the murderer, but lacks concrete proof to present to the authorities. Susie observes Harvey's meticulous efforts to cover his tracks and dispose of evidence, feeling a helpless rage from her heaven as he evades justice.

Lindsey's Courage

Lindsey, driven by her father's suspicions and her own intuition, bravely breaks into George Harvey's house to search for evidence. She finds a charm from Susie's bracelet and a diagram of the underground hideout, confirming Harvey's guilt to herself and her father. This act of bravery brings a glimmer of hope for justice, though the evidence is not enough for a conviction.

Abigail's Retreat

Overwhelmed by grief and the suffocating atmosphere at home, Abigail begins an affair with Detective Fenerman and eventually leaves the family. She seeks an escape from the unbearable pain and the constant reminder of Susie's absence. Her departure further fractures the family.

dynamic, leaving Jack to raise Lindsey and Buckley amidst his own unresolved sorrow.

Growing Up Without Susie

Years pass, and Susie continues to watch her family from heaven. Lindsey and Buckley grow into teenagers and young adults, each navigating their lives under the shadow of Susie's murder. Lindsey finds love and builds a future, while Buckley struggles with his fragmented memories of Susie and the profound impact her death had on his childhood.

Susie's Longing and Connection

Susie, from her heaven, experiences moments of intense longing for earthly connection. In a profound supernatural event, she briefly inhabits Ruth Connors' body, allowing her to share a kiss with Ray Singh, her first crush, and experience a fleeting moment of physical presence and connection with the living world she left behind.

Harvey's Fate and Family Healing

George Harvey continues to evade capture, but his life takes a turn for the worse as Susie watches. He eventually meets his demise through a series of accidents, falling into a sinkhole. Her family, over time, begins to find their own paths to healing and acceptance, culminating in a sense of peace and Susie's final release into a deeper, more expansive heaven.

Themes

- Grief and loss
- Justice and vengeance
- Family and connection
- The afterlife
- Memory and trauma
- Healing and acceptance

Notable Quotes

- "My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973." — The opening lines of the novel, establishing the protagonist and the central tragedy.
- "These were the lovely bones that grew around my absence: the connections — sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but bone by bone, they were all there. I was part of a strange new art form." — Susie reflecting on how her death created new bonds and shaped the lives of those she left behind.

- "I had been alive and then I was dead, and then I was not. I was a ghost, a memory, a whisper." — Susie describing her transition from life to the afterlife and her new, intangible existence.
- "He was a man who had made a heaven out of a hell, and a hell out of a heaven, and he knew it." — Susie's observation about George Harvey, highlighting his twisted perception and actions.
- "I was in the middle of a perfect day, and then I was not." — Susie recalling the sudden and brutal interruption of her ordinary, happy life.
- "There was a way in which my mother and father, and Lindsey and Buckley, were all part of a single organism, and when I died, it was as if a limb had been severed." — Susie describing the profound and devastating impact her death had on her family unit.
- "I had been given a heaven where I could see everything, but I could touch nothing." — Susie expressing the bittersweet nature of her afterlife, where observation replaces interaction.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the lovely bones about?

"The Lovely Bones" tells the story of fourteen-year-old Susie Salmon, who is raped and murdered by her neighbor. From her personal heaven, Susie watches her family cope with their grief, her father's relentless search for her killer, and the ripple effects of her death on their lives. It's a unique exploration of loss, justice, and the enduring power of love.

Is the lovely bones worth reading?

Yes, "The Lovely Bones" is widely considered a powerful and unique novel. It offers a fresh perspective on grief and the afterlife, blending the horrific with the beautiful. Readers appreciate its emotional depth, compelling narrative, and the way it explores difficult themes with sensitivity and hope.

How does the lovely bones end?

Spoiler: George Harvey, Susie's killer, eventually dies accidentally by falling into a sinkhole, with an icicle falling on his head. Susie, having witnessed her family begin to heal and move on, finally achieves a sense of peace and moves further into her heaven, letting go of her earthly ties. Her family finds a measure of closure and continues their lives.

Who should read the lovely bones?

Readers who appreciate literary fiction that explores complex emotional themes, especially those dealing with grief, loss, and the aftermath of trauma, will find this book compelling. It's also suitable for those interested in unique narrative perspectives and stories about family dynamics.

How long does it take to read the lovely bones?

Based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, "The Lovely Bones" typically takes around 5 to 7 hours to read. The exact time will vary depending on individual reading speed and engagement with the story.