

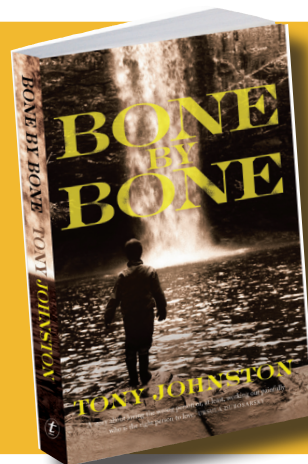
Bone by Bone

Tony Johnston

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Fiction paperback



Praise for *Bone by Bone*

'Somehow it's always a shock to be reminded of how very recently this kind of racism and oppression was openly practiced in the US and especially the South. As with *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the story builds up an oppressive narrative tension towards the inevitable violent climax. It's an unhappy read but a powerful piece of writing, with Johnston capturing flawlessly the child's storytelling voice as he proceeds towards an independent view of the father he simultaneously loves and despises.' Kerryn Goldsworthy, *Sydney Morning Herald*

About Tony Johnston

Tony Johnston, a teacher and full-time writer, grew up in an atmosphere of racial intolerance. *Bone by Bone* is based on that experience. Though it could have happened anywhere, it is set in the south of the USA, where Johnston's father was born and raised.

A reader's introduction to *Bone by Bone*

This novel is set in the racial hotbed that is 1950s Tennessee in the south of the United States. In the preface the writer describes it as a slower and more innocent time, but also as a 'meaner' time. It was a time where strong racism was directed towards Afro-Americans, a time where the wider white community considered them a lesser people and, at times, barely people at all. Black children did not attend white schools or ride on white buses or sit on public seats unless they were marked 'Blacks Only.' It was also the home of the Ku Klux Klan, a terrifying cult of white supremacists who disguised themselves in white robes with slits for eyes and whose symbol was a burning cross. They murdered blacks, burnt their homes and brought with them a constant sense of terrorism and horror.

This is the story of a lovely and innocent 'heart-friendship' between David, the son of a 'nigger-hating' doctor and Malcolm, a black boy whom David's father has threatened to shoot if he enters their house. They spend all their play-time together, getting up to all the fun and mischief that one would expect from eleven-year-old boys. Hovering over their friendship is David's father, a doctor, who is frightening in his prejudice

and his obsession about David becoming a doctor, too. He shows by turns a tenderness and a cruelty and insensitivity to his son. There is also his grandmother, a fearful but rather ineffective woman, who loves David, but is unable to protect him and his one-hundred-year-old great-grandmother, a very difficult, bed-ridden woman. The only real solace for him is the tolerant, understanding and jovial Uncle Lucas. Sadly he is not around all the time.

Questions for discussion

1. Many colourful passages are used in the opening chapter of the novel, such as Malcolm's crying 'is nearly pulling down the evening sky', 'Stars clustered in the walnut tree', and when Daddy 'wanted something his voice turned to butter'. How does Johnston use this style to establish the tone of the novel and what tone is she establishing?
2. Despite the the apparent social inequalities, what methods does Johnston employ to show the fundamental similarities between blacks and whites?
3. The character of Daddy is extremely complex. Do his softer moments redeem his more tyrannical? Is it possible to feel empathy for him? Is he a bad man or a product of his social situation?
4. How is sport used to reaffirm social boundaries? How does this relate to Malcolm's earlier assertion that 'it's a white man's boat we're afloat in'?
5. David's whole life has been lived in the pursuit of becoming a doctor. When he turns his back on this dream, who is he punishing? Is his sacrifice in vain, only hurting himself, or does it have grander implications?
6. As David leaves he realises that he didn't 'hate Daddy. I just hated part of him.' How has David come to this realisation? Do you think it is possible for him to feel this way at this point?
7. By using the first person narrative voice of a thirteen-year-old boy, Johnston is restricted in the sophistication of the writing she can use. Does the simple prose style add to the power of the story being told?