

# Bone by Bone

Tony Johnston

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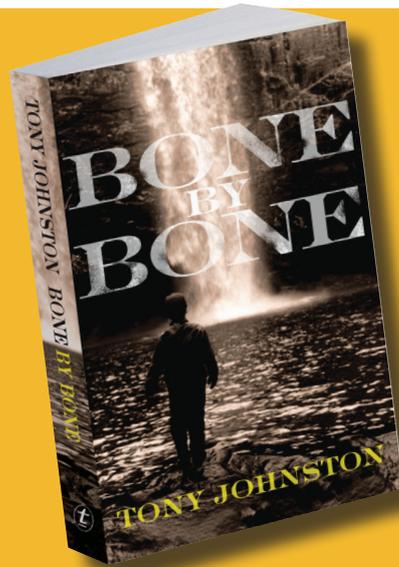
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## Synopsis

This novel is set in the 1950's in Tennessee in the south of the United States which is a racial hotbed. In the preface the writer describes it as a slower and more innocent time, but also as a 'meaner' time. There was a very strong feeling of racism towards the Afro-Americans who were seen as a lesser people and sometimes they were hardly considered as 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. David lives with his 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 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.

## Author Information

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.

## Themes

The themes include the corrosive racism that goes deep into the community and destroys both black and white. The integrity of both the hated and the hater is broken by the racial tension embedded in the communities of the south.

It is also a story of the relationships between father and son—in this case a love-hate relationship in which it is impossible for either one to understand the other.

It is a story about growing up and about the loss of innocence. David and Malcolm hid under the house, longing to hear dark secrets. But neither of them was really aware at that time just how dark and impenetrable the secrets were to turn out to be. By the end of the book David realised he didn't really hate all of his daddy, 'he just hated part of him.' But it was a big enough part for him to feel a need to escape.

It is a story about sacrifice—the necessity of giving up treasured ambitions and family for the sake of what one believes is right. We learn that David pays a heavy price for his integrity just as Malcolm pays a heavy price for his colour.

## Style

The story is sometimes chilling, sometimes funny, and always very moving. It is narrated simply, but in beautiful prose by the narrator, David. The characters are strongly drawn and you should delight in the way they unfold through the story. The lyrical, deceptively simple prose is filled with rich imagery. The delicate pictures of the natural world only serve to sharpen the atrocities we see in the book.

There is a lot of humour in the book. The truly awful, curmudgeonly one hundred year-old great-grandmother, Gold Ma, creates some hilarious occasions. This humour is important because we could

not otherwise bear the sadness and brutality we find in the story.

The book is notable for its characterisation. Even the most minor characters are portrayed as human, which can make them more scary. Other characters, like Daddy, are very complex. There are no caricatures, no really black and white characters. Even the horrific Slur behaves as he does because he is always drunk.

### Chapter 1

The writer grabs our attention from the opening line.

- How does the narrator startle us and then make us laugh?

This chapter marks the beginning of their friendship. Colour is of no importance to either of them. It is Daddy who points out Malcolm's colour.

- How does David paint a very visual picture of his father on p. 3?
- What is suggested by saying his shirt was 'stiff as rigor mortis'?
- Why do you think Daddy asserted that Malcolm could not wear a sheet on Halloween?
- We very soon are given more detail about Daddy. How does David feel about his father?

We also learn that David's mother is dead, that he lives with his fearful grandmother and his bed-ridden Gold Ma.

Look carefully at the language that is used in this chapter. Malcolm's crying 'is nearly pulling down the evening sky'. 'Stars clustered in the walnut tree.' When Daddy 'wanted something his voice turned to butter.' When he talks to his mother, he 'peels off his charm.' The moon 'was the colour of a persimmon.' David and his father walked through Halloween, 'wrapped in the haunted silence of the moon.'

- How do these phrases add not only to the visualisation of the scene, but also to the atmosphere?
- If Daddy could 'peel off his charm,' what does it tell us about him?
- When David talks about 'walking in the haunted silence of the moon,' what does it tell us about how he felt?

### Chapter 2

This chapter is again full of pictures of people.

When we first met Malcolm we only saw that he was little and terrified. Here we see him as a fire cracker, full of fun and ideas, a wonderful friend for a boy to have. He has also a thoughtfulness and a depth that goes beyond the fun of a pissing contest. After they make their mud baby, David wonders if that is how God made people. But Malcolm sees there is something missing—'the light inside.'

- What does he mean?

There they were, two boys, in summer, hooting like mad. It sounds like an idyllic world. But we are soon reminded of the dark side of their world when Slur Tucker arrives.

- How is his evil shown to us in the physical description of him?
- We also have our first real picture of David's grandmother. What does she look like? Why do you think she was always afraid? Why was she always sweeping? (This is mentioned several times in the book.) Why do you think she was as 'taciturn as a churn' and was always reading?

David stands up to his father as much as he can, honestly saying that Malcolm is his friend. But there is no one to support him. Malcolm describes his father as a devil. Malcolm sets himself the goal to change the Nigger Rule. And we are aware for the first time of something mysterious in Daddy's past, a black woman perhaps?

This chapter is full of descriptions of the senses—the cooking in the kitchen and the sounds of the street.

- In about 150 words describe cooking something in your kitchen. What can you see? What can you smell? What can you feel in your hands?
- Close your eyes and listen carefully to the sounds you can hear outside or inside the room. Then describe these sounds as vividly as you can.

### Chapter 3

- For David's tenth birthday, his father gives him a bowie knife and a raincoat. What does this tell us about his father?

### Chapter 4

On p. 28 we enter Gold Ma's bedroom. We all know how every room and every house has its own smell. And they all 'smell of things that had happened long ago.'

- In about 100–150 words describe a room that you know. How does it smell? What can you see? What can you hear?

There is an unforgettable description of Gold Ma which sums her up. 'Though her body was wizened up like a raisin, her tongue was sharp as a boning knife.'

- Think of three people you know and try to sum them up in one colourful sentence each.

Although Gold Ma is as bigoted as her son, there is a great deal of humour in the chapter, particularly regarding the Last Ring of Hell. We are also introduced to Uncle Lucas, 'loud as a bass drum. And funny.'

- Why is it important to have this light-hearted moment in this stage of the book?

### Chapter 5

This chapter is very important in showing us how alike the blacks and the whites were.

- What methods does Johnston use to emphasise their sameness.

**Chapters 6 and 7**

- What was strange about David's birth presents from his father?
- Malcolm and David loved to play under the house. What were they hoping to find out?
- What else do we find out about the insensitivity and cruelty of Daddy from these chapters?

**Chapter 8**

'A bad thing moved among us, known as the Ku Klux Klan.'

It was enough to cause David terrible nightmares.

- We see another side of Daddy in this chapter. How do we see his gentler side?

**Chapter 9**

- Describe the Black Bob Cave. Why is it described as 'rank with possibilities'?
- How did Malcolm and David seal their friendship there? What do you think would have been Daddy's reaction?

**Chapter 10**

We learn more about Uncle Lucas in this chapter. He breathed joy into the family. When he sang he was 'afloat on the beauty of the notes.' He was 'a figure cloaked in romance.' He could swear and still seem godly; he travelled all over the world; he had an innate understanding of boys and what they needed. He was the only person who seemed to bring out the warmth in Grandma. 'They hugged as if taking a long drink of water.' He understood David and understood his brother.

- What fuels David's suspicion (p. 61) that his father belongs to the Klan?
- How do we know that Uncle Lucas doesn't believe that Daddy will ever change?
- Why was the 'trick box' of such importance to David?

**Chapter 11**

'The devil is driving to church.'

- What does the car-washing incident tell us about Daddy?
- Can you think of any reason why this bullying should occur at this point of the story?

Again we find some lightness in contrast to the cruelty of the chapter before. We have Miss Grace who is warm and friendly to both boys and 'built like a hen.'

- What does this description suggest to you?

There is lovely humour, too, in the boys' ambition to see the arm of Grace's Confederate great-great-grandfather. There is also delight in the hunt for Grace's pig, Gethsemane.

In the midst of the frustrating hunt they met the Mole Man, 'a marvellous mystery' who earned his living killing vermin. David believed he was a crazed killer who rode round on his bicycle, calling out, 'What's yo' killin' wants? What's yo' killin' needs?'

But far from being a loony cutthroat, he had wanted to be a doctor, just like David. As Uncle Lucas explained to him, 'coloured people best not have dreams.'

- What did Malcolm mean when he told David that a Negro can't have dreams because 'it's the white man's boat we're afloat in.'

A great sadness swept over David, 'like a great grey wave off the sea.'

- Why does Uncle Lucas tell David to never talk of the Mole Man again, but to always call him 'Mr Swann'?
- What does this tell us about Uncle Lucas?
- How did David demonstrate his new-found respect for Mr Mole?
- There is a moment of hope at the end of this chapter. How does the description of the sun in the last paragraph on p. 78 show this to us?

**Chapters 13 and 14**

- We needed the lightness of the last paragraph of Chapter 14 because here we are obsessed with bones, grave-robbers, David's morbid desire to visit a morgue and the horrible Mortifying Body Song which the boys relished ghoulishly. And Daddy was mortified when David said Malcolm knew all the bones.
- He called David a liar. Why?

In the next chapter which continues the theme of death we see another side of Daddy in the way he looks after his old friend.

- Why does this make David even more determined to be a doctor just like his Daddy, even though his father has put him through the trauma of visiting and touching a dying man?

But the tension of this chapter is broken up by the hilarious account of Gold Ma's determination to go to the wake.

- Write a short account of this in your own words.
- Write an imaginary scene where a serious occasion is disrupted by something incongruous happening.

**Chapter 15**

'Daddy was a fool for baseball.' And as the summer approached the boys felt that they would love the game forever. For David, baseball seemed a way of getting around Daddy's hatred of Africans. The boys would try out for the same team. Of course, Malcolm was not allowed to try out, because, 'niggers don't get to do what white boys can.'

- How did David react to being on the team without Malcolm?

- Do you think David was naïve in expecting Malcolm to be accepted? Why do you think this?
- Describe your feelings if something treasured by you was desecrated by a parent (p. 99)
- In what ways is Malcolm's father different from David's Daddy? (p. 96)

### Chapter 16

- Why is there a rift between David and Malcolm?
- What is David's reaction to this break-up?

On the way home from cleaning Miss Grace's windows, he is pleased with the chink of money in his pocket, but we sense his mood in his view of the 'withered magnolia blossoms, curled and brown like small cigars.'

Suddenly he comes upon a terrified Malcolm, being attacked by Hell, the rooster, and taunted by the drunken Slur, who had obviously set the rooster on him. With incredible bravery David rushed into the fray and managed to rescue Malcolm, amid taunts that the Klan would get him.

In the ensuing silence, Daddy appeared. He was without shame. It was then that David realised he never wanted to be like his father. 'We were like two people tugging in different directions on the same rope.'

When his father strolled in, saying it was just a joke, 'Silence stole in and chilled the room.' David 'could feel the dark.'

- Why are silence, cold and darkness so appropriate to this scene?

### Chapter 17

The next few chapters turn from death and hate to images of love. Firstly there is the image of Fats taking on flesh and becoming his friend. There is a radiance in the air. Fats sings sweetly of love. 'His voice rang all around us, beautiful as a hymn. It shimmered in the leaves of the trees. And along the pavement. Till my bones sang with it.'

But Fats had died. He had been lynched.

- Why is Fats described with such beauty in this dream?

### Chapter 18

Love takes on a real form in this chapter with the arrival of Tinney, with 'skin the colour of licorice' and smelling 'of talcum and righteousness, a fearful combination.'

- How does this make you feel about her?
- Why was David shocked when Daddy tried unsuccessfully to embrace her?

Her toothless gums smelt of Juicy Fruit, her dress was like a whole field of flowers. She told him she had been watching him since the day he was born. But who was she? How could she just waltz in to the house? Whatever the answer he felt she was a blessing on him and on Malcolm. He believed she would watch over Malcolm and see he came to no harm. A little later he saw Malcolm and Mr Deeter.

### Chapter 19

There is a blend of humour and horror in this chapter.

- The shooting of the overdose of toasters is funny in itself. Where does the note of nastiness creep in on p. 119?

It grows worse with Daddy's drunken driving and the terrible realisation that David's grandmother is frightened of his father.

David's anger reaches boiling point when he is asked by his weeping grandmother to take up a piece of wedding cake to Gold Ma. When Gold Ma said, 'Your nigra friend's not getting any o' that cake,' he screamed that she was 'a nigra and you can't stand it, so you hate every one of them.'

- How did Daddy punish David for this outburst?

Notice the plain and unadorned way this horrible scene between father and son is written.

- How does this style of writing make it even grimmer?

### Chapter 20

'After the destruction of my treasures, I wrapped myself in anger like a thick winter coat.'

Malcolm kept a low profile. David refused to see Gold Ma unless absolutely necessary. His book-loving grandmother told him about codes. And through codes, Malcolm and David kept in touch.

At Christmas, David learns that Tinney had been Daddy's nurse, his mammy.

- Why did Daddy love Tinney and hate all other blacks so much? Do you find this a difficult part of the book to understand?

### Chapter 21

- Tell the story of how David and Malcolm were bequeathed the arm.

There is a colourful description of Christmas dinner on p. 136.

- Describe a Christmas meal or other celebratory meal you have known. Make sure that your readers can smell it and see it and taste it.
- Do you think Daddy's grace before the meal was hypocritical? Why?

Again David shows his bravery and defiance in giving Mr Swann Christmas dinner. He has his uncle's support.

- But, out on the porch, Christmas ended for David. Why was this?

### Chapter 22

- David turns 13. He has sat for the exams for Barlow. Why has he decided he doesn't want to go?
- When they go to the graveyard, sadness seeps into David's bones. Make a list of all the images in the graveyard that make it such a sad place (pp. 143-5).

- The finding of Geth, the sow, was an anticlimax, but it was soon overtaken by the greatest atrocity. What was this?
- Why do you suspect that it was the doing of the Ku Klux Klan?
- Describe in your own words what happened.

### Chapter 23

Grandmother was 'bleak with horror,' but she could not comfort David. When David talked to the sheriff he felt the grown-ups no longer cared.

- Give two reasons for this.
- Why did David search through his father's things?
- Why did he hear the sound of constant sweeping which made him afraid to go to sleep?

### Chapter 24

David dreams of people clothed in white angel wings. These changed horribly into robes and pointed hoods.

- Can you, in just 200 words describe the atmosphere of a dream you have had?

### Chapter 25

David is determined that he will not go to Barlow and will never become a doctor like his father.

- What steps does he take in this chapter to get out of it?

David receives a very cold welcome when he goes to Howard to find Tinney as he is seen as the son of the 'nigger hater.' He is rescued by a large man named Gideon and taken to Tinney. He poured out his heart about Mr Swann. Tinney replied that 'Ugly's out there, baby dear. Like a wile animal. You dwell on it too much, you can't move.'

When he mentioned his fear that his Daddy was a Klansman, she replied, 'Mebbe yes, mebbe no.'

- What reasons did she give David for the way the Klan behaved?
- And what did she mean when she said that 'the one who hates has already lost the most important thing of all.'

### Chapters 26 and 27

His battle with his father over Barlow begins.

On his thirteenth birthday Daddy takes him into the town. But Daniel has decided he is going to be like his uncle.

- Do you feel that all this celebration is for Daddy's benefit—that he wants to show off his clever son?

When he arrives home, there is a tomb-stone rubbing from Malcolm. For David, 'stars came out to tack up the sky.'

### Chapter 28

The crisis of the story comes in the last chapter.

- Describe in your own words what Malcolm must have felt when he asked for entry to David's house when the Klan were after him?
- Again, how do you think David felt?
- How does Daddy react to this?
- Why does David say before he leaves that he only hates part of Daddy? What part of him did he love?
- What do you feel will become of David?
- Imagine that 10 years have gone by. Write a story saying what you think has happened to him. Where is he? What is he doing? Try to fill your story with the colours, sounds, smells and feelings which make this story so beautiful.

### Further issues for discussion

- Have you ever been the victim of racist insults? How did it make you feel?
- What evidence of racism have you seen in your school or your neighbourhood? How did you deal with it?
- How would you feel if your family refused to let you have anything to do with your best friend?

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