

Granny was a Buffer Girl by Berlie Doherty

Reading Group Prompts

Before reading

- What type of story do you think this is going to be? Why do you think that?
- What do you think a buffer girl is?

Chapter 1: Celebrations

- From whose viewpoint do we see the celebrations?
- Jess and Grandpa Jack: what is their relationship?
- What clues are there that they have a special affection for each other?
- Each of Jess's relatives is seen as they are in the mid 1980s – when Jess herself is an adolescent. How do you think this will affect our view of them in the following stories – when they were teenagers themselves?
- How does the author introduce us to Danny? How do we know he is going to be an important character in the novel?

Chapter 2: Bridie and Jack

- Doherty sets the scene immediately and subtly. What can we find out about Bridie, and about working class girls in the 1930s by reading just the first two pages?
- How important is Bridie and Jack's religion to them? To their parents?
- Would it be as important to us today? Would young people from different religions have different views on its importance?
- Compare the reactions of Bridie's parents with those of Jack's parents
- What image does Berlie Doherty use to show Bridie and Jack are escaping their past? How effective do you find this image?

Chapter 3: The Buffer Girl

- How does the author immediately make us think that Dorothy dreams of a fairy tale prince for a husband?
- What do we learn about men's expectations of women in general and daughters in particular from reading the first three pages of this chapter?
- What distinctions are there in jobs for men and women in the steelworks? What are 'buffer girls' and 'cutlers'? How did the buffer girls protect themselves from the dust?

- Dorothy realizes that her dream - that Mr Edward will marry her - is just a fairy tale. Why does she respond to Albert, 'the boy next door' so positively?
- Would social class still restrict marital choice?

Chapter 4: The Saturday Hop

- With Michael's story we move into the 1950s. How much freer is he, than Jack was thirty years earlier?
- Compare men's expectations of women in general and daughters in particular with those in the 1930s. Mike expects his sister to do things for him, because his father expects his mother to wait on him. How has Dorothy's life changed since she was a teenager?
- Doherty describes Maureen and Mike's clothes in detail. Where did these styles of clothes originate? How did World War II change life and expectations for British people?
- Mike has to do National Service. What was this, and why did he dread it?
- Why was Albert so triumphant when he handed Mike the letter on his eighteenth birthday?

Chapter 5: Lucy Cragwell

- This chapter tells us how Jess's parents met, yet Jess's mum only appears in the last page. Why does Berlie Doherty spend a whole chapter telling us about characters which aren't part of Jess's family?
- Boyfriends and marriage: compare the attitudes of Jennifer and Lucy with those of Bridie and Dorothy twenty years earlier.
- How does Berlie Doherty help us sympathise with Lucy?
- How might life have differed for Mike if he had married either Jennifer or Lucy?

Chapter 6: Danny

- Why is it in this chapter placed in the centre of the book, not at the beginning, where we first learn about Danny? How three-dimensional is Danny as a character?
- Analyse the feelings of a) Mike and b) Josie about having a disabled child, particularly as he grows older: try to explain the mixed emotions they show.
- It's always hard being a second or subsequent sibling. What makes it even harder for Jess?
- Berlie Doherty displays an honesty in showing that people can resent the special attention given to disabled people. How does she make us sympathize with Jess, rather than hating her?

- Jess and John try to come to terms with Danny's death. How? Is it successful for Jess?

Chapter 7: Bird Boy

- When Mike was called up for National Service, he said 'I couldn't even squash a tadpole' (p67), yet he is angry with at John at first for keeping the injured pigeon. Why?
- Mike likens the bird that can't fly to his own situation – a steelworker with no job – a powerful simile. What other similes or imagery can you find in the chapter? Discuss the effectiveness of these similes.
- Why do you think he is more concerned about the demise of the steel industry than about his own job?
- After this episode John and his father are closer than ever before. What brings them together? How does Jess now also feel included?
- Compare the way Mike's character is drawn in this chapter. What do we learn about him? How does Berlie Doherty build his character (consider action, dialogue, description, views of other characters). Compare Mike's character with the other fathers in this book, Albert and Jack. How are they alike? How are they different?

Chapter 8: A Boy of Seventeen

- Jess has a frightening experience in this chapter. Her fear has a number of different causes – try to explain her reactions.
- What does Jess learn from Davie about being old, and remembering his youth?
- What does Jess learn about love from her experience?

Chapter 9: In Fear of the Giant

- In this chapter, as in the previous one, Jess faces a situation which has frightened her. How do you think this helps her to move on in her life?
- Compare the life which Auntie Louie lives with Uncle Gilbert, to what she would really like – in many ways this shows the differences between the 1950s and the 1980s.
- Berlie Doherty uses Uncle Gilbert's life as a metaphor of the steel industry – unable to adapt, and then struck down and powerless, leading to an inevitable death. How does she do this?
- Do you feel more sympathy for Uncle Gilbert or for Auntie Louie? Find reasons for this. Is it because of what is in the book, or because of your own likes and dislikes?

Chapters 10: Disco

- Jess learns a great deal more about friendship, trust and love. How does her previous experience, which we've read about in the earlier chapters, help her cope?
- Look at the imagery of the falcon and its jess. In what ways does it represent not only her immediate infatuation with Terry, but the wider picture of Jess's life now?
- What part does Katie play in this chapter? Would you have behaved differently if you had a friend in Jess's situation?
- Why does Jess resent Katie's advice? Would you, in a similar situation?
- Do you think Katie has told her brother about Jess and Terry?
- Compare this chapter with chapter 4 the Saturday Hop. What do you notice about the dialogue in these chapters? Why are there differences in dialogue? Do young people today talk like the characters in chapter 4 and chapter 10. What differences would there be today? You might write a short piece of dialogue to show the differences.

Chapter 11: Going Away

- Why do you think has Berlie Doherty made this a separate chapter of a single page?
- What do we learn about Jess's new relationship with
 - a) the present b) the future c) the past
- Do you feel that she has now found resolution?
- What do you think a sequel would tell us about Jess's future? Can we tell from this last chapter?

After reading

- Discuss these questions with a partner and then write your final reflections on this book in your reading journal.
- What did you most enjoy about reading this book?
- Was did you find most difficult?
- What questions do you still have after reading?
- What have you learned from reading this book?