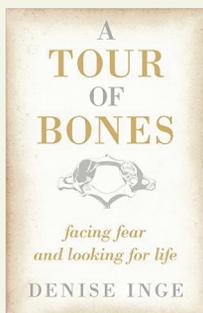


In Reading Groups

Book Discussion Guide from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

by Jeff Langford



A Tour of Bones

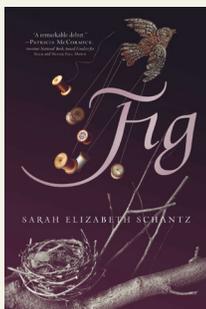
by Denise Inge

Inge discovers that her house is built on a crypt full of human skeletons. Facing her fear takes Inge on a journey into the meaning of bones themselves. This exploration takes on a new significance when mortality abruptly ceases to be hypothetical.

1. Inge states, “When we avoid talking about death, we avoid talking about life.” Do you agree? What are some ways we avoid talking about death?
2. Inge talks about our fearful way of living: “If, since living in this house, I have thought more frequently about the brevity of life and the longevity of bones, I have also thought more about fear, about how all fears lead back to the fear of death – and how, if you are going to live an unfrightened life, you need to face that head on.” Describe what an “unfrightened” life might look like.
3. Reflect on Inge’s discovery about human need: “This journey never brought me to the brink of danger as other adventures have done, but it has taken me deeper into the knowledge of my need of other people, deeper into gratitude for kindnesses and deeper into an understanding of those simple things which are common to all humanity. It reminded me that need is sometimes the mother of receptivity.”
4. Inge observes “...I begin to understand that the link between strangeness and forgiveness that was first suggested to me in that charnel house in Czerdna is a deeper one than I had thought. When you embrace the stranger you make your enemy your friend.” How does this connect to Jesus’ commands to “love your neighbor” and “love your enemies”?
5. How would you answer Inge’s question — “Are the broken parts of your deep self being healed?” — prompted by the charnel house at Czerdna?
6. Respond to Inge’s assertion about resurrection: “Resurrection is a hope that I feel Western society has mainly lost. At the very least it is a hope about which we know little, and so about which we hardly dare speak with conviction.”
7. Inge notes that “questions about the resurrection are inescapable because they are really questions about what it means to be simultaneously and inextricably both spiritual and physical.” What “inescapable” questions do you have about resurrection?
8. “To be hope at all (rather than some kind of vague optimism or fanciful dream) hope must have one foot in the mud.” Do you agree? What are some concrete ways this idea might be seen?
9. How would you answer Inge’s question — “Have you found a lasting hope?” — prompted by the charnel house at Sedlec?
10. “It seems to me there is a tendency, in our day of globalization and modernization, to forget the local and historic, and I wonder whether we have counted the cost of our forgetting.” What important parts of your life and memories are tied to a specific locale?
11. At Hallstatt, the position and painting on the bones seemed to commemorate the life of the person. In America, how do we typically commemorate the life of the dead?

12. As Inge journeyed toward the Hallstatt charnel house, she describes being afraid to move forward, not because of the awaiting death but because a more wild and vibrant life was to be found at the waterfall. How does this tension affect our tendency to avoid talking about death?
13. Inge asks this question: “When we were, in the main, believers, our story was a story of faith with its virtues and vices and its panoply of saints, heroes and villains. What are the stories to which we now go for inspiration and instruction?”
14. How would you answer Inge’s question — “What are the things for which you will be remembered?” — prompted by the charnel house at Hallstatt?
15. How were you affected by the sign about Naters’ bones — “What you are, we were/What we are, you shall be”?
16. Inge describes the celebratory funeral of George Quell, suggesting it reflected America’s larger denial of death by refusing to allow a space for grief. What are some funeral practices that do and do not give space for our grief?
17. Reflect on Inge’s idea of humility: “This I think is the essence of humility — not a groveling negation of the self, but the grace to admit one’s weakness and to receive enough love, strength or grace for each day.”
18. How would you answer Inge’s question — “Are you on a path of true humility?” — prompted by the charnel house at Naters’?
19. Inge refers to theologian Paul Tillich, suggesting the way we take care of bones addresses our fears about ultimate meaning. What are some ways we try to bring meaning to our lives, even in our deaths?
20. React to Inge’s statement about hope: “Hope is bringing breath and love and sweat to bear upon the darkness.”
21. How was your impression of this book affected by Inge’s cancer diagnosis and death?

NEXT MONTH



Fig

by Sarah Elizabeth Schantz

Love and sacrifice intertwine in this novel about a girl dealing with her mother’s schizophrenia and her own mental illness. As she sacrifices to bring Mama back to reality, Fig begins to lose herself as well.

Jeff Langford is coordinator of CBF Heartland and serves as editor of CBF’s missional formation curriculum.