



Dancing in the Dark

ISBN 978-1-84717-185-6 pb

P.R. PRENDERGAST

Teaching Guide

By PETER HEANEY

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This is a story about relationships and how they are affected by bereavement and grief. James, Jess's brother returns to her as a ghost; although he can still be as irritating as he was when he was alive, Jess is able to sustain her relationship with him until she finds closure for her sense of guilt and loss and is ready to let him go.

The themes include:

- Loss
- Death
- Bereavement
- Bullying
- Friendship
- Ambition
- Jealousy

SUMMARY

This is the poignant yet witty tale of Jess, a dancer, and how she comes to terms with the sudden death of her older brother in a road traffic accident. The story follows the school dance team's preparation for the National Finals, where Jess is on the bench as a sub.

Louisa, the talented lead dancer, is jealous of Jess and employs bullying and exclusion in an attempt to force her off the team.

Jess, however, refuses to be intimidated. Supported by her friend Alan and the constant and at times irritating advice from the ghost of her brother James – who only she can see – she succeeds in outwitting the bullies to establish her own credentials as a dancer.

APPROACH

Working with this book will require a sensitive approach as many of the children may have personal experience of the themes involved.

The text offers a wide range of opportunities to explore the central themes of death; how grief can be

expressed and the effects of bereavement on relationships, personalities and perspectives.

Supported opportunities to explore and express their own views and experiences through directed discussion, personal reflection and circle-time routines will help to create the environment where they will be encouraged to express and explore safely their own feelings on death and grief.

The guide is divided into three sections to reflect the development of the story.

UNIT 1 "Missing me yet?" "Almost..." PAGES 9 – 77

SUMMARY

Jess is finishing her homework when her brother James appears. He died six months earlier in a road accident, but seems unable to complete the transition to the after life and has taken instead to appearing to his sister Jess. Their caustic exchanges veil the bewilderment and loss that they both feel.

Jess is unable to confide in her aunts about James's appearance as she's anxious that they might misinterpret her mental state.

At school she is distracted by the routine and by her friend Rhona. When they meet the new boy, Alan, they are not impressed and offer him some survival advice about being new to the school and how the uniform *should* be worn.

Jess is a sub on the school dance team; however this is still too close for Louisa and Amanda, the lead dancers and Jess's erstwhile friends. When they interrupt her practice in the gym they make it clear that she is not welcome on the team.

Alan encounters Richie and his gang of

bullies and Jess realises from his reaction that he will become an easy target.

James has now begun to appear to Jess in class, offering comments on the lessons, much to her amusement. However, the pain of her grief is still very close as she recalls the desolation of the time between his death and his first appearance to her.

Louisa is the centre of attention before rehearsals begin, modelling a ring that her boyfriend Richie has bought for her from his betting win.

Jess is isolated by their intimidation as everyone is reluctant to challenge Louisa openly; she recalls the day Amanda staged her public humiliation and summarily evicted her from their group.

James confides to Jess that death has left him lonely; he misses the companionship of life. This mirrors Jess' own feelings on her exile from her friendship group and its effect on her confidence. James determines to remedy this and begins to apply his sports psychology experience to bolster Jess's confidence.

Rhona has made a very public statement of her allegiance to Jess who, braced by this and by the quiet, unobtrusive support of her mum, begins to build a strategic indifference to the bullying.

However family life is far from reconciled to their bereavement and Jess can only watch, helpless and impotent, as her father tries to cope with his huge loss.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read p 19): Is it really that important or indeed healthy to belong exclusively to one group? What are the advantages / disadvantages of allowing yourself to be associated with one group only? Why do you think that people generally expect you to belong to a group?
- (Read pp 28 – 30): Richie and his thugs have singled Alan out for intimidation;

SUMMARY

Amanda is off the team with torn ligaments and there is a chance for Jess to replace her. Alan tries to help Jess practice. James finds this funny and horrifies Jess by suggesting that Alan is her boyfriend.

The practice is interrupted by Richie and his gang. They intimidate Alan into leaving and then smash Jess' CD player and CDs before delivering the message that she should withdraw from the team. James feels impotent frustration as he is unable to protect his sister.

Jess vents her anger first at James, for not wearing the cycle helmet that might have saved his life in the accident; then she directs it at Alan (who has returned to the gym) for being ineffective and cowardly. Finally she runs from the gym in tears.

At the dance practice, Miss Smith decides that Jess will replace Amanda, despite Louisa vigorously and publicly trying to persuade her that she is making a mistake.

Everything is tempered for Jess by James and by the memories of the things they shared before he died. This is set in the context of the void that is now home where her parents attempt to cope with their loss.

Alan returns from a day's absence, and to Jess's acute embarrassment, he has replaced the CDs and player that Richie destroyed. Jess realises that while Alan might be unable to deal with Richie's bullying; the depth of his character reminds her of James. She is also beginning to notice his absence whenever he is not with her.

James has decided to contribute to Jess's preparation for the dance finals and delivers his *'Three Steps to Greatness'* strategy in an attempt to ensure maximum psychological focus for her, in the process, levering her thoughts out of the past and into the present.

This is not easy for her as Jess is haunted by the trauma and her guilt from the day James died. She is also unable to come to terms with the shock and humiliation of her very public expulsion from her group of friends.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read pp 89–90): Jess has become very angry with both James and Alan. Do

Jess believed it was inevitable he would be picked on. What do you think makes someone vulnerable to bullying? Do you think there is a 'type' who is always going to be bullied? Or can anyone become a victim or a bully?

- (Read p 56): James and Jess are bewildered that he has died so young. Do you think it is reasonable to expect that young people should not die?
- (Read p 76): Jess' dad is grieving for James and at times his grief seems to overwhelm him. How do you think people should grieve? Do you think that grief is different for an adult? Do you think there is a time limit for expressing your grief? In this situation is it really OK for Jess to say nothing? How else might she support her dad?

ACTIVITIES

1. It's Different Now

(Read p 18) You will need to work in pairs for this activity.

Jess is trying to live without James; however everything seems different.

In pairs, could you make a list of how things might be different for you if you had a sudden close bereavement? Try to think of all the routines that might change and what impact these changes would have on your behaviour and your attitudes. Can you make a list of the things that you think might provide the best support for you?

2. Uniform:

(Read pp 20 - 21) A uniform is designed to add conformity to a group of people. In schools however there are many ways of wearing a uniform that can still display degrees of individuality.

Can you draw a sketch of your school uniform and describe the five most popular adjustments to it and explain the significance of each of them? Can you show how different groups within your school might wear the uniform?

3. You Touch Me?

(Read pp 28 & 29) Alan's responses are very ineffective against Richie. What would you suggest, without being violent, that he does to avoid being bullied? Which strategy do you think would work best?

Look carefully at the dialogue between them. Can you rewrite it keeping Richie's comments, but changing Alan's so that he appears more assertive? You can work in pairs for the activity and then perform the new dialogue for the rest of the class.

4. The List

(Read p 57) James and Jess both agree that it is very unsatisfactory to have to die young. It is such a waste of potential; however it can encourage you to think about how you prioritise the things you do and say while you are still alive.

What ambitions would you like to fulfil in your own lifetime?

You can work as a small group to agree on ten ambitions. Then by yourself, choose three from the list that you think particularly apply to you and explain why you chose them.

5. Memories

(Read p 38) James' death was sudden and his family are trying to find comfort in the memories they have of him. Sometimes, as a comfort, people will keep little personal items and photos in a memory box to help them remember. If you were asked to create your own memory box for your friends and family, what items would you include?

Can you work in small groups to draw up a list of five things that you think your memory box should hold? Can you explain why you choose them and what comfort you think they might bring?

6. The Signs

(Read pp 34 & 47) After Amanda's attack on her, Jess is wondering if there were signs that she might have spotted that could have warned her about how the group felt about her.

If you were a school counsellor and Jess had asked for your help, how could you have helped her identify the signs that their relationship was beginning to fragment?

Can you work in groups to identify ten signs that a relationship is beginning to disintegrate and then prioritise the top three? Can you offer advice on how to avoid the humiliation and preserve your dignity during a breakup?

7. Did you see that!

(Read pp 45 – 50 & 60) P.R. Prendergast, the author, has decided to rewrite page 60 as a dialogue. Louisa, Amanda and Lizzie are at the table and Rhona has just 'blanked' them.

He has asked for your advice on the dialogue between the three girls and how they react to Rhona. Can you help him with the script and show how their attitude changes towards Rhona as she walks past them? You will need to keep it very short.

you think she is being completely reasonable in her reaction? Why do you think her anger appeared so suddenly and so aggressively? Why did she not direct it against Richie as well? If you witnessed the scene what advice / comfort could you offer to them?

- (Read pp 100 – 102): Jess has to confront Alan and is surprised by both his actions and his reactions to her angry assault on him. Why do you think her opinion of him has changed? What do you think his actions say about him? Do you think they reflect him in a positive way? How do you think you personally would respond to a similar challenge either as Jess or as Alan?
- (Read pp 124 – 126): When Jess first learns of James' accident, her reaction is one of irritation and annoyance with him. When she recalls this, it is with a sense of guilt and shame that she didn't initially appreciate how serious his injuries were. Do you think that her sense of guilt is either normal or deserved? Why do you think that people will sometimes feel angry with the person who has died or guilty with themselves, particularly if it is a sudden death? Do you think this is usual?

ACTIVITIES

1. It was great

(Read p 91) Jess has recalled the times when she, James, and their mum and dad spent time together; it was idyllic.

Can you recall a memory from your own repertoire of experiences that would leave you with a similar sense of contentment?

Perhaps you could describe and illustrate it the way Jess did?

2. The Memory Wall:

(Read p 92) Jess recalls a time when she and James shared almost everything. It seems that she is able to construct a wall of memories that can protect her from the reality of what has happened.

Good memories can be very powerful in this way.

Do you think that you could work together either as a class or in groups to construct your own memory wall? You could display it on the wall / section of the wall in your classroom. The memories should all be positive and the event that you are recalling should be something that the whole class were involved with i.e. your

first day at school; the school concert; a school trip etc.

3. Where are you?

(Read pp 108 – 111) James has offered Jess some very useful advice about how she should keep her thoughts in the present. This advice could apply to most things we do.

You can check whether you think in the past; present or future quite easily. You can work in groups for this activity and complete it over two sessions. In the first session, choose something that you will do later that day day... e.g. school lesson; exam preparation; socialising with friends; sporting activity; doing something tedious, etc.

In the next session, after you've completed the chosen activity, try to remember your thoughts while you were involved in the activity and record them in a table showing past / present / future thinking.

Can you identify which activities held your attention in the present? What does this tell you about the strategies we generally use for dealing with events in our lives?

4. You can cope!

(Read pp 115 – 120) Jess is the victim of a vicious bullying campaign of suggestion and innuendo. Eventually, with her mum's support, she develops an effective strategy to deal with it.

Can you make a list of five other things she could have done and say what you think the likely outcome of each might have been?

Why do you think that her strategy was effective? Which one thing that Jess did do you think proved the turning point for her?

5. I Like it

(Read pp 119 & 122) Rhona is completely indifferent to Louisa's insults and, with her quick wit, she is usually able to turn the insult around with a devastating one-liner.

Can you work in small groups to create a list of the five best one-liners you've ever heard, used or wished you'd used?

Can you select one of them as the winner and explain how, when and why it was used and the effect that it had?

6. The Colour of Grief:

(Read p 128) When James died, life for Jess changed instantly and irrevocably. Her grief was tangible and coloured everything she did. It changed how she saw the world.

www.artchive.com/artchive/M/munch/cream.jpg.html, or url.ie/7ukn. Look at

Edvard Munch's picture *The Scream*. Do you think that you could create a picture of how Jess felt after James died? Which elements of her experiences would you include? Which colour or colours would you choose?

7. You can't say that!

(Read p 129) After a bereavement Jess discovers that people, including friends, are usually at a loss for what to say and either say too much or nothing at all.

Can you work in groups to create a simple guide for people of your age on what to say and do and more importantly what not to say to a friend who has been bereaved.

Your guide should give a little background on grief and some of its effects and the most effective ways to support someone. If a close friend has been bereaved, then you might well be their first line of support.

www.rd4u.org.uk/YouthBooklet.pdf

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/AboutGrief.html

SECTION 3 The Competition PAGES 133 - 183

SUMMARY

The dance competition finals are just days away and James continues coaching Jess; completing the three steps in his programme. Alan gets the chance to accompany Jess in one of her practice routines and spontaneously offers his interpretation of her dancing and why Louisa hates her so much.

Jess is stunned by Alan's words and, as James disappears again, she is left to recall how her life has changed since he died.

The day of the final arrives and despite the excitement, Jess senses that something is wrong with the team. James reappears and his body language confirms Jess' foreboding. It is during the second routine when a second dancer falls unexpectedly that Jess realises that Louisa is deliberately trying to lose the competition.

James confirms a betting fraud that Richie has organised in an attempt to recoup his heavy betting losses. He urges Jess to think of her own safety and not to try to interfere with the plan. Jess hasn't been included in the plan because Louisa is confident that she can out-dance Jess in the final routine when it is just the two of them on the stage and force her to fall.

The final routine sees Jess and Louisa

perform a comedy tap dance. As the tempo of the routine increases, Jess experiences an amazing sense of calm and presence when she realises that not only can she keep up with Louisa; she is able to out-dance her.

Unable to upset Jess's rhythm, Louisa is forced to attempt to throw the competition herself; however Jess is able to anticipate Louisa's error and accommodate it seamlessly, giving the impression that they are all part of the performance and in the process she wins the competition for the team.

Escaping the celebrations to return home, Jess is confronted by Louisa, Richie and the Hoolies, bent on retribution. Alan appears and this time he is able to use non-violence to challenge and deflect Richie's assault. Isolated and defeated, Louisa and Richie leave.

In the glow of triumph next day, James returns for the last time. His transition is now complete and he is ready to move on. He confesses to Jess that she is the one destined to be champion and as she hugs him for the last time, she realises that he will never be far from her.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read pp 145 – 146): Alan tells Jess exactly what he thinks of her dancing and she is reluctant to accept his opinion.
- Why do you think that he spoke out now? What was he trying to achieve and why do you think that Jess dismissed him. What effect do you think expressing an opinion in this way can have?
- (Read p 171): Alan absorbs Richie's assault without retaliation and in the end Richie is shown to be ineffective and is forced to leave. Do you think that Alan's actions had any effect on either Amanda's or Lizzie's decision to desert Louisa? Why do you think Alan's behaviour proved to be effective? Do you think he was foolhardy and lucky or can non violence be an effective response?
- (Read P 172): Amanda is the first to desert Louisa; followed by Lizzie. They realised that what they had attempted to do was wrong. Why do you think that Louisa was able to influence them in the first place? What pressures do you think might have been used? Why do you think that they supported Louisa against Jess? Why do you think people sometimes allow their

decisions to be influenced to do something that they know to be wrong?

ACTIVITIES

1. I wouldn't be seen dead wearing that!

(Read pp 134 – 140) After noticing how James is dressed, Jess realises that the clothes you are wearing when you die will become your outfit for eternity.

Can you work in small groups to design the 'perfect' outfit combination that you would be comfortable to spend eternity wearing? You will need to consider; age, fashion trends, boredom levels, etc?

Can you also design / describe an outfit that you currently have that you definitely wouldn't want to wear; one that you wouldn't want to be seen in? Can you explain why?

2. It's Past

(Read p 136) James's second piece of advice for Jess is to let the past go; that way you can disable its influence on you.

Can you work in small groups to try to identify the top five things that continue to annoy you after they have happened?

Can you rank them and explain how the effects of each might influence you and the decisions you make?

Choose one that is the most significant for you and explain how you might be able to take James' advice and 'let it go'?

3. What's it like?

(Read pp 134 - 135) You will need to work in small groups for this activity.

Alan is obviously curious about the circumstances that James finds himself in and takes the opportunity to ask a question about what it is like to be dead.

If you were to be given permission to ask just two questions of anyone in the whole of history, who would you ask and what questions would you put to them? Could you explain your reasons for choosing these people and for asking these questions?

4. Where are they now?

(Read p 145) It is now twenty-five years since their success in the dance finals and the school have organised a reunion for the team. As part of the celebration, they have produced a magazine and included a 'Where are they now' section.

You have been asked to write the sections for Jess, Alan and Louisa.

Think carefully about what you have learned of their characters and try to make accurate predictions about their life journeys for the next twenty-five years.

5. Judges Fall For Jess!

(Read p 166) Jess has rescued success for the team and everyone is buzzing with excitement over her routine.

In the hall watching her dance was the editor of *Footlights*; a magazine for entertainers.

She has come to the finals to do research on an article she is writing for the magazine on 'New dancing talent' and she has decided to write a short piece on Jess' performance.

Could you write the article? (Max 200 words)

6. Every Move I Make

(Read pp 180 – 181)

www.rd4u.org.uk/YouthBooklet.pdf

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/AboutGrief.html

James tells Jess that the sharpness of the grief that she and her dad are feeling will eventually ease to sadness, but for her mum the memory of James will always be painful.

Can you work in groups to try to identify three typical responses to grief? For each response can you say how you might recognise the response either in yourself or in a friend or family member?

How do you think that you might support someone who was experiencing one of the stages or responses?

7. P.S.

(Read pp 182 – 183) It is a year later and the anniversary of James's death. Jess has finally decided to clear out his school bag. It is the first time that she has looked at his books since he died.

A lot has happened in her life since then and she still misses James. However he was right and the hole in her heart has begun to close and heal.

As she lifts out one of his books, a small envelope falls out of it. She sees the word Jess written on it. The handwriting is unmistakable. It is James's.

Trembling, she opens it to read.

What do you think she read? When do you think James wrote it and what did he say?

Could you recreate the letter?