The Lovely Bones
By Alice Sebold

Senior English Study Guide
Table of Contents

Introduction ...............................................................................................................................................3
Examination questions from 2004 - 2006 ...............................................................................................4
   NCEA Level 3 ........................................................................................................................................4
   Scholarship..........................................................................................................................................4
Historical Context .................................................................................................................................5
Plot.........................................................................................................................................................6
   Plot Structure Analysis ......................................................................................................................6
      Rising Action.................................................................................................................................6
      Falling Action...............................................................................................................................7
   Plot Summary ......................................................................................................................................8
Themes..................................................................................................................................................13
   Loss and Grief ..................................................................................................................................13
   Life and Death ..................................................................................................................................13
   Coming of Age and Rites of Passage ...............................................................................................14
Setting..................................................................................................................................................15
Characters and characterisation ...........................................................................................................18
   Characterisation..............................................................................................................................18
      Susie...............................................................................................................................................18
      Jack Salmon...................................................................................................................................20
      Abigail Salmon.............................................................................................................................21
Method of narration or point of view ....................................................................................................22
Style.....................................................................................................................................................23
Symbolism: concrete things used to represent abstract ideas. .............................................................23
Critical Overview .................................................................................................................................25
Introduction

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold might seem a gruesome book to study in an English class. After all it is narrated by a dead girl (Susie Salmon) who was raped and murdered at 14 and went on to watch her family struggling to cope with their loss. Her murderer was a serial rapist and killer who hid her remains in a safe and dropped them into a sinkhole. All that was found of her was her elbow, an item of clothing and her charm bracelet. To make the story even more unsavoury is the fact that the girl narrates the story from a – to put it mildly – unconvincing heaven where paradise is what you want it to be, reflecting all your favourite things from earth.

In spite of all the above, the book became a best seller and a much studied high school text. Alice Sebold had published a previous book called Lucky which was a memoir of her own rape and its aftermath. Lucky was well reviewed but did not sell many copies until The Lovely Bones catapulted Sebold into the limelight.

Why has The Lovely Bones been so successful? It certainly could give comfort (or solace Sebold prefers to call it) to the bereaved because it shows such a strong link between the living and the dead. It gives the dead a pleasant place to be and even provides a sort of happy ending. Although it is upsetting to read about the death of a 14 year old, it is also comforting to read about her continued existence in another sphere and about her family’s eventual coming to terms with her death.

While all of the above has no doubt contributed to the book’s success, it has also led to criticism. The heaven in the novel offers false comfort to the bereaved, say critics. However, I have come to the opinion that the wise reader does not interpret the book this way. ‘Heaven’ is a device which gives us a certain perspective on the grieving process. Sebold could have written a conventional novel about a family in grief but instead she has included the deceased in the story. This enables her to give us a fresh look at the topic and a wider frame of reference. She was able to add another dimension; the character telling the story knows the bereaved very well. After all she is their daughter and sister and they are grieving for her. In the ‘magic realism’ of the book, she is even able to make some limited contact with those on earth and drive the narrative along at times. The fact that Susie lost her youth is also dealt with, reinforcing the theme of growing up, coming of age and working through a long process towards acceptance. Susie has to deal with what she has lost just as her family has to deal with the loss of Susie. Susie must accept that she is no longer living just as her family must make a new life around her disappearance.

So the author treads a delicate tightrope between a gruesome, bad taste treatment of death and an overly sentimental portrayal of heaven and grieving. I think she achieves the tightrope act remarkably well apart from some “girlie” moments when Susie remembers her high school relationship with Ray and the questionable incident when Susie inhabits Ruth’s body. Actually, I think the latter has some merit if read sympathetically. What helped me to appreciate the book was my focus on Abigail during my second reading. I found her grieving process convincing and even helpful to my own understanding of such things. I also found the book quite fascinating after I read that Sebold herself was raped as a teenager. A previous girl had been raped and killed in the same place so the police told her she was lucky to be alive. Hence the ironic tile of her memoir Lucky. She started writing The Lovely Bones and then realised that she had to get the rape out of her mind first so wrote and published Lucky before continuing with The Lovely Bones. This, she said, was to prevent her from writing the typical ‘autobiographical first novel’. (Why do you think this is significant?) Anyway, the fact that Sebold knows what she is writing about lends the book some extra authenticity for me, although I suppose we should accept a book on its own merits.

High school students around the world seem to be studying this book. There are notes on websites like enotes, Spark Notes, Book Rags and Pink Monkey Notes. There are a number of schools in NZ studying it. And why? There is a major theme of coming of age and the book has teenage characters. Moreover, the literary conceit of having part of the book set in heaven and the technique of having a dead narrator give a fertile ground for discussion.

Lastly, I have used the Russian book cover on the first page of this booklet to enable you to see a different interpretation of the central idea. While the American cover emphasises the symbolism of the bracelet and the house, the Russian cover depicts the penguin trapped in a perfect world. A younger Susie looks pensively. What do you think the branches which reach out into the world outside the globe represent?
Examination questions from 2004 - 2006

NCEA Level 3

• ‘Most novels are written to reflect real events in real worlds.’ Discuss the features that make a novel you have studied seem realistic (or unrealistic), and explain why realism is appropriate (or inappropriate) to the novel’s main themes.

• ‘Writers often comment on the values of a society by using characters who are alienated because of their race, gender, class or beliefs.’ Identify such a character in a novel you have studied and discuss how that character’s alienation sheds light on the strengths and/or weaknesses of his / her society.

• Major characters in novels usually undergo a change of some sort. In a novel you have studied, how is the change in a major character linked to a key theme or themes?

• To what extent do you agree that novels use a clash of opposites to present ideas? Discuss your views with reference to a novel (or novels) you have studied.

• To what extent do you agree that personal weakness is to blame for what happens to the central character(s) in novels? Discuss your views with reference to a novel (or novels) you have studied.

• To what extent do you agree that novels show us that there is something to be gained from standing up for what we believe, no matter what it costs? Discuss your views with reference to a novel (or novels) you have studied.

• To what extent is setting OR symbolism OR structure a significant feature of novels? Respond to this question with close reference to a novel (or novels) you have studied.

• With close reference to a novel (or novels) you have studied, discuss how complexities of human relationships are explored.

• To what extent do you agree that novels offer us hope that human behaviour has a moral purpose? Respond to this question with close reference to a novel (or novels) you have studied.

Scholarship

• With close reference to one or more novels you have studied, discuss how distance between people is explored.

• “All great novels express both a feminine and a masculine vision of the world.” – Milan Kundera With close reference to one or more novels you have studied, discuss how apt this statement is.

• Discuss the view that there is little pleasure to be had from novels in which good finally triumphs, all problems are resolved, and love prevails.

• “The greatest mystery of all is the human heart, and that is the mystery with which all good novelists are concerned.” (PD James) Discuss how this concern is explored in a novel or novels you have studied.

• ‘A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end ... but not necessarily in that order.’

• How does the order of events guide and control the reader’s understanding of characters and events in a novel or novels you have studied?

• ‘In literature, personal matters [eg triumph, love, loss or pain] often take centre stage, while power and politics are relegated to the corners.’ Discuss the relationship between the personal and the political in a novel or novels you have studied.
Historical Context

Knowing the context will not only help you understand the book but also complete Unit Standard12427 “Read closely and evaluate the effectiveness of poetic written texts” in which you have to analyse three texts in context. This is an optional addition to your level three studies through which you can gain 4 credits. It is no easy option but will help you with your level 3 externals and is not so challenging if you take note of the historical context of each text as you study it.

The book was released in 2002 but was written in the late 90s by an American author. The historical, cultural and social context was therefore American society and culture at the turn of the millennium.

In many ways, the novel reflects various concerns held by Americans in the 1990s. These are a growing awareness of, and concern with, domestic, sexual, and teen violence such as exhibited in the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado.

Certainly Sebold alludes to the frequency of child kidnappings in the first chapter when she mentions that it is so common now that lost children are profiled on milk cartons. Back when the book was set, the 1970s, such crimes were not so common.

More controversial is the claim that her novel, released less than a year after September 11, 2001, spoke directly to America’s need for comfort after such a terrible act of random violence. Alice Sebold wrote her novel after the attacks but her subject matter perhaps helped to make the book a best seller. (Sebold herself says that the link between her book and 9/11 is preposterous and something dreamt up by her publicists.)

The novel is also embedded in the cultural, social, and political issues of the 1970s. The women’s movement occurred in the 70s when people began to question the traditional gender roles of women and men.

This element is obvious in the role of women character like Abigail who feels a vague discontent with her role as housewife and mother, a discontent that is fanned into a sort of nervous breakdown after she loses Susie. She feels so guilty that motherhood did not come naturally to her that she cannot let herself grieve openly for Susie until eight longs years have passed. Ruth Connors on the other hand overtly embodies the feminism of the 1970s with her refusal to conform to normal feminine behaviour and dress.

Another 70s concern was the suburbanisation of America. Susie often refers to the identical houses in her suburb and Grandma Lynn cannot believe that her daughter chose to live in a soulless suburban dwelling.

New Age religious movements could also be part of the overall historical context. In the 80s and 90s new age beliefs took the place (for many people) of traditional religions. New Age philosophies involve embracing a vague spirituality. They are associated with alternative medicine, health foods, back to nature movements and a sort of Eastern mysticism where life and death are part of the same continuum.

Figure 1: Alice Sebold
Plot

Plot Structure Analysis

The novel takes place over a period of eight years after Susie Salmon’s death. However, it is filled with flashback scenes where Susie remembers something in her life and the lives of her family and friends and they are inserted into the story.

There is also a mini-Prologue, which involves Susie’s memory of her father and the penguin snow globe, which causes the reader to focus on the idea of a perfect world. The whole novel then becomes a search for that perfection in the midst of over-whelming grief.

There is an interlude called Snapshots between Chapters 16 and 17. This is meant to emphasize the idea that the pictures Susie had taken are snapshots of many lives and the memories they retain. They also help to analyze why the characters make the choices they do.

The last section of the book is entitled Bones, but it is really an epilogue. We see how the Salmon family and their friends finally step away from their grief and release Susie to Heaven. It also gives us an explanation for the title: The Lovely Bones are actually not just Susie’s body; they are also the cement that binds her family together and allows her to find her “wide, wide Heaven.” That’s why they’re lovely.

What is Rising Action?

In the plot analysis of a typical play, book or film, rising action refers to the dynamic period after the exposition, when conflict has been introduced. Generally the protagonists will face more and more conflicts, until a climax is reached and the conflict is resolved.

Rising action very often comprises the majority of a work. The basic conflict is complicated by the introduction of related secondary conflicts, including various obstacles that frustrate the protagonist's attempt to reach his or her goal.

Rising Action

The rising action begins with the scene of Susie’s murder and ends just before she falls to earth and enters Ruth’s body.

In between are the eight years the Salmons endure the burden of grief. We see such things as

• the pain Lindsey feels when the Gifted Symposium uses the Perfect Murder as their culminating project; the time
• that Mr. Salmon thinks he’s trapped George Harvey in the cornfield and is beaten himself;
• the first Christmas after Susie’s death when Lindsey receives the broken heart pendant from Samuel;
• the exploration of George Harvey’s house where Lindsey finds the sketch of the cornfield;
• Jack Salmon’s heart attack and near death;
• Abigail’s return home;
• Samuel and Lindsey finding the old house and becoming engaged;
• and Susie falling into Ruth’s body so she can have her heart’s desire fulfilled by the Grace of Heaven.
• There is really no suspense in the rising action except when Lindsey goes into George Harvey’s house, but it is a culmination of wonderful and also awful moments in the lives of a family who has suffered greatly and deserves peace.

What is falling action?

Falling action is the part of a story following the climax and showing the effects of the climax. It leads up to the denouement
Falling Action
The falling action first involves the wonderful experience between Ray and Susie through the miracle of her entrance into Ruth’s body. It is very uplifting, because it shows how love triumphs in the end. (Or is it because the girl who died after a rape has experienced a loving relationship as part of the general healing in the book.) The falling action also involves the aftermath for all of the Salmons and their friends: Jack and Abigail resolve their marriage; Lindsey and Samuel are married and have a little girl Buckley becomes a good young man who will come to forgive his mother Ruth continues what makes her happiest – using her sight to help the dead and the living Ray becomes a doctor and never forgets the possibilities of Heaven Susie lets go of Earth and faces her eternity. She leaves us with her final blessing, “I wish you all a long and happy life.” The reader then can close the book with the sense that he/she has just been through a process of reconciliation, redemption, or coming to terms.
Plot Summary

Preface. Snow globe that had a penguin in it. This image becomes a metaphor for Susie's life: trapped in a perfect world.

Chapter 1. Susie’s murder on December 6, 1973, by Harvey who lures her to an underground shelter he built in a cornfield. Anti-mystery: not who killed Susie but the emotional implications of this single act of violence, and it starts by giving voice to the one person usually left out of mysteries, the victim.

Chapter 2. Susie enters heaven, where she learns that everyone's heaven is different. Susie meets her roommate Holly and has an "intake counselor" named Franny. Back on Earth, her father gets a phone call on December 9 telling him that a body part has been found. When the police search the cornfield, they find a copy of To Kill a Mockingbird which Susie was studying. Len Fenerman the officer in charge investigates a boy named Ray Singh, who had written a love note to Susie, but find him innocent. Eventually, the police find Susie's woolen hat, which convinces them Susie is dead. The confirmation shatters the Salmon family emotionally. The description of heaven has no particular religious significance and shows it as a wish fulfillment for individuals.

Chapter 3: When Susie's soul left her body, it brushed Ruth Connors, causing a special awareness in Ruth who becomes obsessed with Susie. Susie watches Ruth from heaven, and is comforted by Franny. She also watches her family, seeing her sister Lindsay touch her (Susie's) clothes, her father smash the ships in bottles they built together, and her brother sleep. As she watches, Susie remembers the first photos she took of her family. The Lovely Bones opened with a brief story about Susie's father's explanation of the perfection found within snow globes. Ships in a bottle are very like the penguin in snow globes; they are contained examples of perfect worlds, completely under their makers' control. Salmon smashes the ships he built with Susie, acting out the way in which the perfect little family life he'd built was smashed by an outside hand.

Chapter 4: Susie watches her killer, Harvey, moving back in time to review how he filled in the hole in the cornfield, and forward in time to preview how the next owners will see but not recognize the bloodstain in the garage. Susie watches Harvey remember his pleasures, and get rid of her remains by dumping them in a sinkhole that serves the town as a dump, throwing the silver charm bracelet in an industrial lake but keeping the Pennsylvanian keystone. Susie's father helps Harvey building a ceremonial tent in his backyard and guesses that Harvey knows something about Susie's death. He asks Harvey, but Harvey says that he can't help him.

Chapter 5: Susie wishes her father would turn violent and seek vengeance for her. Instead, he becomes guilt-ridden and quietly obsessed. He tells the police that he suspects Harvey. Len Fenerman visits Harvey and finds him strange, but he doesn't find any reason to suspect him. At Christmas, the Salmon family tries to be happy, but isn't succeeding until Samuel Heckler comes over to visit Lindsey and give her a gift. While he is giving Lindsey her gift—a necklace with half a heart on it—Mr. Salmon explains to Buckley that Susie is dead. Samuel kisses Lindsey. Here the two potential roads to creating moral and emotional balance in the world are laid out in stark contrast. There is the road of violence and vengeance. It should be a road of justice, but the police won't help, and Mr. Salmon doesn't have it in him naturally. The other road is the road of love. Even though Samuel Heckler follows a clichéd path with the necklace, it works.

Chapter 6: Susie remembers Ray Singh almost kissing her as they were both backstage at the school; they are interrupted when teachers talk to Ruth Connors about improper art she's drawn (nude women). Ruth goes walking in the cornfield where Susie was killed; she and Ray make a connection. Mr. Salmon goes to talk to the Singh's. Mrs. Singh's beauty and silence makes him uncomfortable. She tells him to make sure who killed his daughter, and then to kill the person. This chapter shows an array of accidental connections. When Susie hides backstage, Ray Singh does not just flirt with her, or stare at her. Instead, he speaks what most teenage girls wish to hear: he tells her directly that she is beautiful. Likewise, Mrs. Ruana Singh tells Mr. Salmon what he wants and needs to hear: to kill his daughter's killer. (From enotes)
Chapter 7: Buckley shows his friend Nate Susie's room, and says that he has seen her since her death—that Susie came into his room at night and kissed her on the cheek. As she watches this from heaven, Susie remembers playing under the framed grave rubbings hanging in their home; their parents had learned to do grave rubbings on their honeymoon. This brief chapter sums up a number of symbolic and emotionally intense connections and insights—and how people are trapped and limited. Even in death, able to move through space and time at will, Susie can't tell whether her beloved little brother really saw her. As she watches him with a friend, Susie remembers the grave rubbing and the story of the knight, who is trapped in time.

Chapter 8: Harvey dreams of buildings. Susie watches peers back in his memory, all the way back to when he was a baby. She watches him remember when Harvey's father forced his mother out of their lives. This brief chapter explains a lot about Harvey. He dreams about buildings. Harvey does this in part because his father was a builder and he is dreaming of being like his father. However, buildings also often symbolize the psyche (the mind with all its levels), and Harvey dreams of them because his psyche is so damaged.

Chapter 9: Grandma Lynn, Abigail's mother, comes to help out during the funeral. She helps her daughter Abigail, and teaches Lindsey about makeup. Susie remembers Mrs. Bethel Uttermeyer, the only dead person she and Lindsey had seen before Susie died. Grandma Lynn helps Lindsey dress for the funeral, taking an outfit from Susie's closet that looks good on Lindsey. Samuel Heckler, Samuel's older brother Hal, and Ruth Connor all attend the memorial service, as does Clarissa. (Clarissa had loaned Susie the outfit that Lindsey wore to the funeral.) Ray Singh did not attend, but Len Fenerman did, and so did Harvey. A funeral is a symbolic demarcation, a time when the community lets go of the deceased and, ideally, the dead person moves on. This funeral also marks other things specific to this family. Both the police and Susie's killer attend the funeral, marking it as unfinished and unnatural. Grandma Lynn helping Lindsey with makeup also marks Lindsey's transition into a new world: adult femininity.

Chapter 10: While at the statewide summer symposium for the gifted, Ruth Connors and Lindsey Salmon have a bit more contact; when Ruth dreams about Susie, she shares it with Lindsey, who in turn admits how much she misses her sister. Lindsey and Samuel become a serious couple there, spending a lot of time kissing and eventually having sex. Susie watches them. There is a competition at every gifted symposium. This one is how to commit a perfect murder. This chapter is all about unexpected connections, all of which are created or exposed through Susie's death. Ruth and Lindsey connect at camp over how much they miss Susie. Lindsey and Samuel became a couple in the wake of Susie's death. The competition theme directly relates to Susie's death because it seems to be the world in which they're all living, in which a perfect murder's been created. It also foreshadows Harvey's death.

Chapter 11: Susie watches Harvey's house from the afterlife, exploring his house in detail so that she sees the elaborate plans he's made to appear normal, such as setting a clock to remind him to pull the drapes. She also watches him remember his past killings and attempted killings, and finds the crawlspace where Harvey had hidden the body of animals he'd killed. In the first week of July, Len Fenerman comes to the Salmon house to tell the Salmons there is no reason to continue investigating Harvey. This upsets Mr. Salmon, and that night sees a light moving in the cornfield and goes to investigate with a baseball bat. However, it isn't Harvey there, but Clarissa, who is meeting Brian Nelson. Brian thinks Clarissa is being threatened, and clubs Mr. Salmon repeatedly as Susie watches helpless from heaven. Both Harvey and Mr. Salmon lead lives of unnatural regularity related to violence. Harvey must regulate his behavior in order to cover the fact that he kills. Mr. Salmon tries to regulate his, to return to a normal life, but cannot. Susie's death haunts him.

Chapter 12: Mr. Salmon's knee was damaged so badly that it required surgery to replace the kneecap. When Abigail Salmon gets to the hospital, Len Fenerman explains what happened. They go outside to smoke, and Abigail kisses Len, beginning an affair with him. When Susie sees the kiss, Susie remembers the signs of her mother losing contact with her inner self, and falling out of love with her father. This chapter develops two different ways that people can be damaged, ways that are
parallel but not the same. Salmon is damaged physically by a baseball bat's impact. It is sudden and fierce. Abigail Salmon is damaged emotionally by slowly losing contact with her innermost self.

Chapter 13: Lindsey goes back to junior high in the fall, where she is now known as the sister of the dead girl, and the daughter of a crazy man due to her father's actions. Mr. Salmon slowly recovers from his knee surgery, and returns to work in November. He grows apart from his wife emotionally, but grows closer to Lindsey and Buckley in different ways, including teaching Lindsey to shave. Together they plan for Lindsey to break in to Harvey's house. Grandma Lynn visits for Thanksgiving. She recognizes that her daughter Abigail is having an affair, and asks her to end it.

This chapter tracks the emotional ripples spreading outward from Susie's death. It changes Lindsey's social identity, not once but twice. It changes the emotional structure of the Salmon family, and Mr. Salmon must step in to guide his daughter where his wife should. Finally, when Grandma Lynn visits, she sees that her daughter is having an affair, which forces her to speak more bluntly than had been their custom.

Chapter 14: Lindsey watches Harvey's house for a week, then breaks in. She gets away with a sketch of the cornfield, but Harvey sees her. When she leaves, she takes a drawing with her, which she gives to her father. As Lindsey's searching the house, Susie reviews Harvey's past: how he went to public places to search for victims, how he constructed his cover stories, etc. In heaven, Susie calls the names of all of Harvey's victims, and gives the dates. One of them, Flora Hernandez, meets Susie in heaven, and tells her that the other girls will be there soon.

This chapter follows Lindsey's path after her sister's death: further away from the social norm, until she becomes the only girl on a boys' soccer team—and someone who breaks into a killer's house. Susie's plunge into Harvey's house and memories shows how intimately they have been linked by his violence, both Susie and Harvey and Susie with the other victims.

Chapter 15: Harvey remembers stealing things with his mother, something they enjoyed and shared. He also remembers her advice about putting the past behind him, and a time when drunk men who wanted to rape his mother trapped them in a truck and they had to flee. In the present, Harvey reports his house has been broken in to. The officers search his house, and find it weird, but accept his explanation as to why he was drawing the place where Susie was killed. Abigail indirectly prevents Len from receiving Jack's news about a possibly incriminating sketch by ringing him up and arranging a meeting in a shopping mall. A significant quotation here is “I saw the chances of Mr. Harvey's capture diminish as I watched the end of my family as I had known it ignite.” The past and the present are juxtaposed in this chapter to show Harvey's current cunning, and the origins of it, and of his emotional upset. When he was young he was desperately upset by someone (the three men) trying to break in to his private place. When Lindsey does so now, he is traumatized. His emotional construct starts falling apart.

Chapter 16: Ruth and Ray Singh are now involved emotionally. It is December 6. The two go to the cornfield for a memorial. Others see them, and there is a spontaneous community gathering. Mr. Salmon asks their neighbor Mr. O'Dwyer to sing, and everyone joins in. Susie remembers the summer nights that her father referred to when he asked Mr. O'Dwyer to sing, and how her mother would see her standing in the rain and tell Susie that she looked invincible. In many ways, this chapter shows an ideal community response to tragedy. The memorial service is spontaneous, and heartfelt, and works directly from those memories of those closest to Susie to refer to things she loved, thereby keeping a real memory of her alive.

However, Susie's memory also points out a painful irony, namely the times when her mother would say she was invincible. Moreover, Abigail is “just not interested” in the memorial because her heart is too hardened and her grief repressed so deeply that she cannot see benefit in symbolism and ceremonies.

Snapshots: Susie remembers getting a camera, and how she took many pictures of her family. This chapter contains a number of brief "snapshots" of different elements of her family and community: In the summer of 1975, a deeply unhappy Abigail leaves the family to find herself. Grandmother Lynn comes to stay with them. Lindsey visits the police station to find out how the investigation is going, but sees her mother's scarf and realizes Abigail and Len Fenerman were having an affair. Buckley builds forts and dreams of being a
superhero. In the fall of 1976, Len Fenerman visits the evidence room to try to get a clue about Harvey, but there’s no trace. Despite this, he’s sure Harvey was the murderer. Abigail passes one winter in New Hampshire, then moves to California and gets work in a winery. Each year a memorial is held in the cornfield, but it gets smaller over time. By June 1977, when Susie would have graduated, Ruth and Ray have already left their town. Ruth moves to New York, where she walks around the city sensing traces of murder. Ray studies medicine and sometimes thinks of Susie’s death. Harvey is living in the wilds of the Northeast. In December 1981 Len Fenerman gets a call from Delaware, where a detective investigating a girl’s murder had found one of Susie’s charms. Samuel’s brother Hal has been asking for information through the social network of bikers, and finally gets a clue about a killer who built dollhouses, like Harvey.

Years pass, and Susie watches from heaven. Susie’s passion for taking pictures becomes a metaphor for several things in this chapter. It becomes one of the many ways that people in The Lovely Bones attempt to freeze time. It is how the chapter is organized: all brief flashes of things important to Susie.

Chapter 17: Lindsey graduates college at age twenty-one. She and Samuel are driving home on his motorcycle when the rain became too hard for them to keep going. They get off the bike and find a beautiful abandoned house in the woods, where Samuel proposes. They run home on foot to share the news with the Salmon family. After watching this, Susie thinks about how she often “rode” trains in and out of Suburban Station in Philadelphia when she tired of watching her family. When she did this, she could feel the presence of other dead people watching over their living loved ones. As Harvey dreams of houses, which symbolize his wish for a whole psyche, so Samuel and Lindsey find a house the same day that he proposes. It needs work, but so does Lindsey. When fixed, it will be perfect for them, and will represent the rebuilding of the Salmon family.

Chapter 18: From heaven, Susie watches Ruth walk the streets of New York, marking the places where a woman was killed. This obsession makes Ruth a celebrity in heaven. Buckley grows a wild garden mixing vegetables and flowers. When he raids Susie’s closet for material to stake his tomatoes, he and his father (Mr. Salmon) clash over Mr. Salmon’s extended mourning over Susie. As they argue, Mr. Salmon has a heart attack. Buckley prays to Susie to not let him die. As she watches this, Susie remembers her father taking care of Buckley, especially tucking him into bed, and then is met in heaven by her grandfather, who dances briefly with her and then vanishes. Buckley’s garden is another of the many metaphors in The Lovely Bones. It is an attempt to start something new, and the attempt nearly kills his father, who is still clinging hard to the past when Susie was alive. However, the mix of food and beauty is also like their lives—all of their lives: disorganized, not standard, and only to be understood by working through it, not from the outside.

Chapter 19: At the winery, Abigail Salmon returns home after eight years having heard that Jack has had a heart attack. Buckley is furious with her but Jack is tender. This chapter brings Abigail Salmon home so that the story of the Salmon family can be completed. She must pay a harsh emotional toll for being away so long, but she is welcomed back into love. Abigail realizes that she’d been running away by having her affair with Len and going to California, and that she still wanted to do so, but she stays anyway.

Chapter 20: Harvey sleeps in a shack in Connecticut beside the empty grave of a woman he’d killed there. Susie watches this, and thinks of how she’s started keeping a list of the living, to balance the list of the dead that Harvey keeps. Len Fenerman does this too. Susie watches her mother keep her father company at the hospital. As Abigail sits with Jack, she realizes that she’s been wrong all these years and that she loves him. Abigail admits that even she “sees” Susie. In his shack, Harvey’s dream shifts from one of triumph—of the girl he killed—to one of threat: Lindsey Salmon running from his house. While the shack in this chapter should be taken literally—that is where Harvey is sleeping—it is also a symbol of how far he’s fallen apart. He no longer has imaginary palaces in which to hide, or his dollhouses, or even the fake home run on a time clock. Instead, he is sleeping in a shack, next to an open grave. This symbolizes his state of mind as well as his literal situation. He is unable to successfully pretend that he’s in charge of his life. Neither can Abigail pretend; she realizes she loves Jack and can’t run away from her grief any longer.
Chapter 21: Susie goes to watch Ray Singh, remembering her fears about her first kiss and talking the subject over with her grandmother. In the actual kiss, Ray surprised her in the hall at school, and it was over quickly. In contemporary time, Susie watches Ray and Ruth go back to the area near their hometown to see the sinkhole, where Susie's remains were thrown, that is going to be patched up. Susie watches them come back, watches them pass familiar landmarks and see people they used to know, like Joe Ellis. Susie then follows Len Fenerman as he goes to the hospital where he presents the Salmons with Susie's charm. After this, Susie follows Harvey, who is driving a "patchwork car" back towards their town. As he drives, he remembers some of the girls he killed, but they all blur together. She watches him come back into the old neighborhood, nearing their house where Lindsey is home alone. As he gets close to the house, he is stopped by policemen, who received a call about a suspicious vehicle. He drives away, to near the sinkhole, where he and Ruth pass one another. When they do, Susie falls to Earth. Many elements of the past have been coming back together over the past few chapters, and they come together here, literally and symbolically. The past cannot disappear totally under the surface and Susie's presence comes to the surface just as objects are forced to the surface of the sinkhole from time to time. This is also the culmination of Susie's coming of age. After she experiences the unfinished intimacy with Ray, she can "move on".

Chapter 22: Ruth collapses to the road, but it is Susie's soul that is inside her body. Ray helps Susie/Ruth back to her feet. (Ruth's soul flees to heaven for a time, where she is greeted as a hero by women throwing rose petals.) While Susie is in Ruth's body, she gets Ray to kiss her for real, and then to make love to her. As they do, Susie shares details from things they experience, to prove that it is her (not Ruth), and tells Ray a little about heaven. She tells him to read Ruth's journals. Susie tries to call her family on the phone, to talk to them, but can't speak. Susie realizes she's out of Ruth's body, and that Ruth is back in it. Susie goes back to heaven. This chapter shows things working out as they should. This started in the previous chapter, when Harvey was prevented from going all the way back to the Salmon house. Likewise, in an ideal world, heroes would be welcomed in heaven (as Ruth is), and lovers would get another chance, as Susie does.

Chapter 23: Ray reads Ruth's journals. Jack leaves the hospital. Ruana Singh makes apple pies, and then drops one by the Salmons' house. Hal gives Buckley a set of drums. Grandma Lynn gets water for everyone playing music, and as she does, she spies a young girl "wearing the clothes of her youth" in the garden. Abigail comes home, goes to Susie's room and tells her she loves her. Ruana and Ray Singh drop by to visit. While they are there, Samuel tells about the house that he and Lindsey found the day he proposed. Ray tells him that Ruth's father owns it. Samuel says, "My God," and Susie disappears from the house. The extended Salmon family continues to heal emotionally in this chapter. Buckley's drums are a way for him to pound away his existing anger. Abigail's act of "speaking" to the dead Susie heals a long gaping wound. Finally, the connection to Ruth will allow Lindsey and Samuel to have their dream house, and with it their loving dream life. At that point, Susie vanishes; she is emotionally fulfilled and released by their happiness.

Bones: Susie is now more distant from her family, but she does watch from time to time. She sees Samuel and Lindsey restore the house, and Lindsey become pregnant. She sees Ray become a doctor, one who calls Ruth when he needs to reconnect with his experiences of the supernatural. Ruth is trying to learn to write, to capture her experiences. Susie watches the world from heaven with her grandfather. She watches Harvey, now grown old. He tries to capture a teenage girl at a bus station, but an icicle falls and he falls in a ravine and dies. Susie watches her sister Lindsey grow a garden and name her new baby Abigail Suzanne, after her mother and dead sister. A man finds Susie's charm bracelet after the sinkhole is bulldozed, and says, "This little girl's grown up by now." Susie's last words are "Almost. Not quite. I wish you all a long and happy life." This chapter concludes the book with several final symbolic and/or meaningful moments. First, Lindsey and Samuel name their daughter after Abigail and Susie, ensuring that these loved ones will never be forgotten. Second, Harvey is killed, but almost casually. He no longer matters. Third, Susie's charm bracelet, lost when she was killed, is found, and this leads her to make the final statement: she is almost grown up now, but will still be growing even in heaven. Even after death.
Themes

Loss and Grief

The process of grief and the long road to acceptance and letting go are the main themes of *The Lovely Bones*. The title shows it with its symbolism of the ‘architecture of loss’ (Sebold’s words): the way a new life has to be configured around the loss of a loved one.

Through Susie’s narration, Sebold is able to give us a bird eye view of a grieving family over a number of years. Moreover, by using the device of a dead narrator, herself still a child, Sebold is able to indulge in speculation that even a dead person might need to grow up and accept death. This adds a strange new twist to an old theme of renunciation and acceptance. Susie to me is really just an extreme case of someone in life being forced to accept a new reality: a death sentence, the loss of a friend or some other life changing loss or disaster.

Unlike in a murder mystery, Sebold focuses more on the aftermath and effects of murder and rape on the family rather than on the event itself. Susie watches her parents and sister move through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, Sebold makes clear that these categories do not necessarily remain rigid and that individuals deal with grief in various ways. For example, Abigail, Susie’s mother, withdraws from her living children, Lindsey and Buckley, whereas Jack, her husband, draws closer to them. Lindsey, Susie’s sister, vacillates between denial and acceptance, sometimes exhibiting both elements simultaneously. In addition, *Sebold expands the definitions of both loss and grief by including Susie herself in the process*. If readers limit their understanding of grief to losing and coping with the death of a loved one, then they have trouble accounting for Susie’s emotions. She mourns her own death and the missed opportunity of getting to grow up, but more significantly, Susie grieves over the loss of living people. In other words, the novel extends the grieving process to include the dead themselves.

By including Susie in this process and having Abigail leave the family, Sebold investigates the nature of loss and its relationship to grief. The novel suggests change equals loss, which in turn initiates grief. While Susie’s death emerges as the most blatant change in the lives of the Salmons, other significant changes also occur. Lindsey changes from adolescent to adult; Buckley changes from child to adolescent; Jack changes from a man secure in his place in the family to one questioning his ability to hold the family together; and Abigail changes from a woman questioning her position as wife and mother to one who redefines and then embracing that position. While each of these changes generates a sense of loss, ultimately each character moves on from the loss and grief. In *The Lovely Bones*, both the living and dead learn letting go opens up possibilities.

Relevant quotation

“...not knowing that it (grief) would only go on to hurt in new and varied ways for the rest of her life.” (Reference to Abigail)

“And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it.” Pg 320

Life and Death

On some level, all literature investigates the nature of human experience or the human condition. Certainly life and death constitute the two most significant experiences of being human, and as such, much literature deals with these two issues. *The Lovely Bones* pointedly asks two questions: “What does it mean to be alive?” and “How do we deal with death?” Through the plot and the characters and symbolism, Sebold tries to show that death is ever present in life and that it has to be faced. You could interpret the book as giving a message that the dead are present in some spiritual form or you could just see it as a way of showing we can incorporate memories of loved ones who have died into our lives. We all die and death can hit us at any time so we have to accept it as part of life instead of shoving it aside and pretending it is separate from our daily lives. (There is an old prayer which includes the lines: “In the midst of life we are in death.”)
The book shows how the Salmon family is treated as different because they lost a child in such a gruesome way. People won’t face up to the death and talk about it openly. Ruth and Ray feel that there is a closer relationship between the dead and the living than people realise. However, the bulk of the Salmon family keep Susie alive in their memories in a perfectly healthy way once they come to terms with her awful death. Lindsey makes Susie her baby’s second name. The cynical Abigail can admit that she “sees” Susie frequently but only in her imagination. If Sebold has some unusual spiritual beliefs which she expresses through Ruth, it does not matter. The book shows a sound psychological understanding of the way a person’s presence is still very much part of family life while life itself can go on. Maybe Sebold is just saying that there are some people like Ruth who have a more in-depth awareness of the sheer humanity of those who have died.

As Susie learns what being dead means, she must deal with what being alive means as well. The fact she can no longer experience the physical world—that she can no longer experience living—emerges as her biggest disappointment. The novel then offers experiencing the physical as an attribute of living. Although she has "returned" in a disembodied form when she inhabits Ruth's body, Susie "realises that the marvelous weight weighing [her] down was the weight of the human body." The book shows the preciousness of life.

Coming of Age and Rites of Passage

The coming-of-age novel involves the initiation of the protagonist into adulthood. This initiation usually occurs through the acquisition of knowledge and experience. In many of these novels, the move into adulthood includes a loss of innocence or the destruction of a false sense of security. The protagonist often experiences a shift from ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience, idealism to realism, or immaturity to maturity. In addition, coming of age involves rituals or rites of passage. *The Lovely Bones* focuses on these issues as the author explores the process of growing up.

The novel begins when Lindsey Salmon is thirteen years old and ends almost ten years later, with Lindsey as wife and mother. It traces her move through the routines and events of female adolescence—first kisses, shaving of legs, makeup, summer camp, love, friendship, college. The novel, however, also traces Susie's coming of age. By presenting the development of a dead girl along with a living one, Sebold imbues the experiences of growing up with enhanced significance. Susie cannot move on in death until she finishes "growing up."

Susie's rape and murder hastens the process of moving from innocence to experience for both girls. Susie learns her suburban and rather ordinary world is not safe—men murder children in this world. She moves swiftly and violently from innocence to experience, and from idealism to realism. Yet this shift does not culminate in her "coming of age;" rather, it initiates a need for her to experience these things more slowly and more naturally. While Susie's death also hastens Lindsey's loss of innocence, it does so less dramatically. Although Lindsey understands that her world is not particularly safe, that bad people exist and that these people do bad things, she still participates in the normal rituals of growing up.

Like many teenage girls, Lindsey experiments with makeup and with finding a style that suits her. She experiences a tender first kiss with Samuel, and they move slowly through the rituals of courtship. She grows into her sexuality, developing a relationship based on trust, gentleness, and understanding. However, Susie's murder, combined with her mother's absence, pushes Lindsey into adult roles early in her life. So while acknowledging the naturalness of growing up, Sebold also contextualizes that experience. In *The Lovely Bones*, moving from a place of innocence to one of knowledge can occur violently and abruptly.

In a broader sense adults come of age or grow up too, especially Abigail who goes through a painful arc of development and learning in the course of the novel.
Setting

Setting is a vital part of a novel. It grounds the story in time and place. Novels usually make some sort of social criticism so the world or society the novel represents is vital. It is arguably more important in some novels than others. This is not a novel deeply embedded in time and place (It deals in abstract ideas and emotions a lot of the time), but it still has a distinctly small town American feel and the Pennsylvania factor is also significant. Moreover, the author has decided to set the story three decades ago instead of in the present. Why? Another part of the setting is heaven. Does this setting work? Why, why not?

For more on the theory of setting, see this website: www.encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761560384_3/Novel.html

The most obvious function of setting is to give the story a place to happen. All settings must be convincing and provide a location for events, but they are not merely where the story takes place. Settings in a novel affect the characters, add atmosphere and mood, and even influence events. Setting can be subtle, but also quite powerful.

The fact that it is an American novel means that American people will no doubt read it in a different way to New Zealanders. However it is a universal story which we can all identity with. Also, New Zealanders are brought up with a diet of American films, television programmes and novels. We also belong to a Western society so understanding the setting is no problem. We can probably also recognise the American symbol of Mom and apple pies. Ruana’s pies are a reminder of traditional American motherhood. (When Abigail leaves, Ruana sends apple pies to the Salmons.)

The Lovely Bones is set mainly in a small town near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from 1973 to 1981. There are also minor settings in New Hampshire and California. Notice how the shape of the state is like a keystone. Pennsylvania is called the keystone state because it was a foundational state but also because of its shape. This becomes important when Susie’s keystone charm is the only real memento Jack receives of his daughter. It’s the charm that Harvey keeps. A keystone is a symbol has a lot of resonance. It means something essential or key. It is part of the essential structure of a building just as Susie becomes for her family, So this aspect of the setting is a major part of the book.

Suburban Pennsylvania is the main setting of this story. The suburbs are an area where people know each other's business and secrets. Harvey sticks out because he is single and does not mix with his neighbors. He refuses to come to block parties. He keeps to himself and builds doll houses in his house. His is a non-traditional lifestyle, which makes his neighbors distrust him. (The suburban encroachment on rural land and the soulless nature of the clone like houses is also part of the social criticism in the novel.)

The neighborhood where Susie and her family live is near a cornfield (the Stolfuz cornfield). Susie is walking through this cornfield when Harvey lures her into his workshop. A cornfield is a large, endless setting where something can be lost. The

Figure 2: a Pennsylvania cornfield, left, and right, Millers cornfield in Maryland (south) which is now a memorial ground for the Civil War
cornfield is also where Brian beats after mistakes Brian's girlfriend Clarissa for Susie. The Salmons' friends and neighbors hold a memorial for Susie in the cornfield. Interestingly, many of the battle of the American Civil War were held in cornfields, including battles in the Gettysburg campaign one the most significant events to take place in Pennsylvania. (I wonder if the cornfield has historical/cultural resonance for Americans and that is why it is used as Susie's killing field.) Harvey's underground room is an earthen room under the cornfield which Harvey made and where he lures Susie and then rapes and kills her. Harvey later collapsed the room with dirt. The room is never found.

Near the cornfield is a sinkhole where Harvey throws the safe into which he has stuffed Susie's body. The sinkhole is well-known for its mysterious makeup. Later when the sinkhole is to be filled in, Ruth and Ray come to look at it for the last time. The sinkhole is behind a neighbor's house and where Harvey buries Susie's body. He stuffs her in an old safe and dumps it into the hole. The hole also represents the abyss of emotions into which the Salmons descend.

Part of the novel is set in Susie's heaven which is only vaguely described.

Useful quotations for setting
The era
“This was before kids of all races and genders started appearing on milk cartons or in the daily mail. It was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen.” Pg 5

The cornfield
- “....cut through cornfield back from the junior high...dark out ... days shorter in winter ...broken cornstalks made my walk more difficult. The snow was falling lightly, like a flurry of small hands ...”
- “Ruth frequenting the cornfield. The sun would come up over the cornfield and Holiday ... would come to chase the rabbits in and out of the dry stalks of dead corn. The rabbits loved the trimmed lawns of the athletic fields and as Ruth approached she'd see their dark forms line up along the white chalk of the farthest boundaries like some sort of tiny sports team.”
- attacks suspect in cornfield. “The sound of his feet crushing the stalks was swept up in the whistle and bustle of the wind against the broken plants.” Pg 137 “Harvey crawled into the high stalks and listened again for the sound of whimpering.”
- “Hal and Sam Heckler were standing in the cornfield with their hands jammed in their pockets and their backs turned towards her. Ruth saw yellow daffodils on the ground.” Pg 203

Suburban Pennsylvania
- “I hated our split level on Earth. I hated ...how our house looked out onto another house and another house and another – an echo of sameness riding up the hill.” In heaven: “Our duplex looked out onto a park”
- Pg 168 – Abi and Lynn walking: “They walked into an area of the neighbourhood where the newer families seemed to be moving in more and more. The anchor houses I remember my mother calling them because they lined the street that led into the whole development – anchored the neighbourhood to an original road built before the township was a township. The road that led to Valley Forge, to George Washington and the Revolution.” Valley Forge is best known for lending its name to the encampment of George Washington's Continental Army during the winter of 1777—1778. (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valley_Forge,_Pennsylvania) Here is a quotation from the wikipedia site about Valley Forge National Park: “As a park in an increasingly urbanized area, Valley Forge faces problems including traffic, urban sprawl ...”.
- “The houses one after another identical in structure. ...She never understood places like this – places where her own child had chosen to live.”
- Lindsey and Sam see some wild land."The kind that existed betweem two commercial areas and that gradually by accretion would be eliminated by another strip mall or auto parts store. They find an old Victorian house,Pg 234
- “More and more of these undeveloped patches were diappearing but they more than anything marked my childhood. I lived in one of the fist developements to be built on the converted farmland of the area – but my imagination had always rested on the stretch of road that had not been filled in with the bright colours of shingles and drainpipes, paved driveways and super size mail boxes.
The sinkhole
- The sinkhole: eight miles from their neighbourhood, an area that had been desolate apart from the railway tracks and a nearby motorcycle repair shop. But now new industrial lots in surrounding area—“a reed thin road” — pothole - sinkhole - it had collapsed top make a sinkhole: pg 52
- “If you saw it from a distance the sinkhole looked innocuous – like an overgrown mud puddle just starting to dry out. There were spots of weeds and grass surrounding it and then, if you looked close enough, it was as if the earth stopped and the light cocoa-coloured flesh began. It was soft and convex, and it drew in items placed on top of it.” & “The earths throat burps.” & “All three of us watched the corner of something metal as it rose.” Ruth has a sense that Susie’s body is here ... feels her presence. “Ruth stood there reeling, waiting in the grey light of the Pennsylvania sun.”

Industrial lot
- South of Downington – construction lot
- “He wandered the muddy excavations and got lost amongst the dormant bulldozers, their monstrous bulk frightening in the dark.”
- “Dropped bracelet into what his builders instincts told him would soon be a false pond.”

The crawl space – each house has one: “I knew the darkest place in our house” In basement of Harveys house – had killed animals in crawl space.

High School
Paperback copy of To Kill a Mockingbird – little detail that locates the setting as a 20th century English speaking society where this book is studied a lot – something for readers to identify with. All the other parapenalia of high school including “Gifted Camp”

Pennsylvanian history
- Sam and Lindsey study at Temple Univerisy Philadelphia. On the way home after graduation they bike along Route 30 (Perhaps the most famous of all the US highways in Pennsylvania, US 30 is a part of the Lincoln Highway from Philadelphia to the Ohio border which was the first paved transcontinental highway in the United States. (www.pahighways.com/us/US30.html)

Pennsylvanian climate and general American setting
- Susie standing on porch listening to Mr ODwyer sing – heat – back porch “As rain began falling in heavy drops against the roof ...it was warm and wonderful and the lightening would come and a few moments later the thunder.” Pg 230
- I would pretend I was stiitng on the topmost branch of the maple under which my brother had swallowed a stick and still played hide and seek with Nate or I would perch on the railing of a stairwell in New York and wait for Ruth to pass near. I would study with Ray. Drive the Pacific Coast highway on a warm afternoon of salty air with my mother. But I would end each day with my father in his den.
- Pg 241 “Both of them had run in rain before but never rain this heavy”

Conclusion
1. Notice how bleak and lonely many of the settings are: the Stolfuz cornfield, the underground shelter in the cornfield, the sinkhole, the industrial lot and the crawlspace. All of these manage to convey the horror of the murder – the evil of it really and the tragedy – perhaps the dark side of American life, the mystery of the evil that lurks below the surface. (Note: in Lucky Sebold describes the rape that took part in a tunnel as did the rape of the previous victim.
2. There is also a sense of loss at the encroaching suburbanisation of rural America. Perhaps this also suggests a loss of innocence.
3. There is a sense of irony and regret that the hallowed historical sites of America have been defiled by Harvey’s grubby crimes. Remember that Gettysburg is near here.
4. The rather gloomy weather also sets the mood. Only rarely is there a description of sun and beauty.
5. Setting the story in the 70s instead of the present day give it extra edge because this was a more innocent time when such crimes were even more horrible and unexpected. Perhaps it also gives Sebold a chance to recreate the time of her own youth. Also we can look back a few decades and see the beginning of the woman’s movement.

6. All in all, the setting is well grounded in time and place. The atmosphere is moody and the historical allusions add texture. The various sites in the book like the sinkhole have symbolic as well as narrative meaning.

Realism and the Setting Do a close examination of the setting in your novel. What are the primary locations? How are these places made realistic — how does the author use extended description, background information, and specific detail to make the setting come alive for readers? How do the main characters fit in the settings — do they seem at home? out of place? How do their reactions and interactions with the setting affect the realism of the locations? In your paper, discuss the way that the techniques that the novelist uses to make the setting vivid and real to readers, and the extent to which these techniques are effective.

http://www.tengrrl.com/tens/020.shtml

Characters and characterisation

Characterisation
(from http://victorian.lang.nagoyau.ac.jp/victorianweb/technique/howto.novel.html

When you think of it, one of the strangest things about fiction is that authors can make us react to a bunch of words as if they were a real person. These assemblages of language can make us laugh or cry, get us angry or indignant, and even occasionally treat them as more important to us than people we know. The various techniques that create this powerful illusion of a person make up what we call **characterisation**. Here are some of the more important of these literary devices:

- **physical description** -- telling us what the character looks like
- **dialogue** -- what the character says
- **physical actions** -- what the character does (particularly in relation to what he or she says or thinks.)
- **thoughts, or mental actions** -- the character’s inner life, what the character thinks
- **judgment by others** -- what other characters say and think about this fictional person
- **the narrator's judgement** -- what narrator tells us about the character

*Remember that you can also count symbols amongst the ways in which characters are conveyed. Even a character’s name can symbolise something about him/her.*

**Susie**

Character is one of the most important elements in a novel. We identify with characters and follow their progress through the plot. Characters ‘carry’ the themes of a book and the opposition between them holds a key to its meaning. Although Susie is ‘dead’, and much of the plot is about her family, she still undergoes a character ‘arc’ of development from innocence to experience. She is a rounded character (told in such detail that she seems like a real person) and the book begins and ends with her. She is therefore the protagonist of the book as well as the narrator.

How is Susie’s character represented in the book? Susie is courageous, generous and curious, a dreamer with a desire to be a wildlife photographer, and looks forward to high school and to growing up. Susie shares a special relationship with her father—helping him to build ships in a bottle. She and her sister Lindsey are close, and she is protective towards her little brother Buckley. Susie seems to understand her mother’s need for
privacy and tells of an incident when she caught her mother unawares and saw her as a person not a mother, recognizing how unnatural it was for Abigail to be a housewife and how alienated she was from her real self.

Susie is not ‘gifted’ academically like Lindsey but is still an intelligent and sensitive girl. It is her curiosity that makes her willing to go into Harvey’s underground bunker. She quotes a Spanish poet at the beginning who said to write against the lines so she is a thoughtful person and an individual. On the other hand she embraces American teenage life and bitterly regrets the lost opportunity to grow up with Ray and have a relationship with him.

Susie shows great compassion towards her family in their grief. She feels sorrow for her father and Buckley and hopes that they have been able to ‘see’ her. She tries hard to warn Jack against attacking the person he mistakes for Harvey in the cornfield. She rejoices when Lindsey escapes from Harvey’s house in the nick of time.

Seldom is Susie a direct participant in the action; usually, she observes and reflects. Sometimes, however, she makes her presence known to the living—in the shards of glass from her father's broken ships in a bottle, in a dim appearance at a family gathering, in the body of Ruth Connors. She is with Lindsey as she searches Harvey's house, leading her sister into the upstairs rooms. In addition, much of the action takes place because of someone's longing for, search for, or love for Susie. So, indirectly, Susie influences individual decisions and outcomes.

Just as Lindsey must figure out how to grow up—what it means to live, Susie must figure out what it means not to grow up—what it means to be dead. She learns that like the living, she, too, must journey. Susie also learns that the dead, like the living, must let go, not easy for a girl who wants so desperately to live. (from enotes)

Susie does return to earth. She falls into Ruth's body, initiated partly by Susie's longing to kiss Ray one more time and see where that kiss would lead, and also by Ruth's desire to understand the dead, to see them. Ruth desires to leave earth, and Susie desires to return. After this incident, Susie watches with love and pleasure as her family reconfigures into a new family, one that does and does not include her.

- The Salmon name is emphasised twice: My name is Susie, last name Salmon, like the fish." (pg 5 and pg 309) A salmon's mission in life is to swim upstream against the odds to lay its eggs. Perhaps Sebold uses this image because her character does indeed go against the flow to bring us insights into life from after death.
- Susie’s dream is to be a wildlife photographer. This represents her curiosity, enthusiasm and observant character and has a certain irony. She becomes a wildlife photographer in heaven with the wildlife being humankind on earth.
- Sebold paints her as a typical American teenager at first. This is done through Susie's narration as she frequently goes back in time to tell us of her pre-murder past.

“When I got To Fairfax High I would insist on being called Suzanne. I would wear my hair feathered or in a bun. I would have a body that boys wanted and girls envied, but I’d be so nice on top of all that they would feel too guilty to do anything but worship me. I liked to think of myself – having reached a sort of queenly status – as protecting misfit kids in the cafeteria. When someone taunted Clive Saunders for walking like a girl, I would deliver swift vengeance with my foot to the taunter’s less protected parts. When the boys teased Phoebe Hart for her sizable breasts, I would give a speech on why boob jokes weren’t funny. I had to forget that I too had made lists in the margins of my notebook when Phoebe walked by: Winnebagos, Hoo-has, Johnny Yellows. At the end of my reveries, I sat in the back of the car as my father drove. I was beyond reproach. I would overtake high school in a matter of days, not years, or inexplicably, earn an Oscar for Best Actress during my junior year. ---These were my dreams on earth.”

Notice how much this tells us about Susie as a young person with hopes and dreams but also a person with kindness, self-knowledge and good values.
• Her teenage girl characteristics cause her to follow Lindsey’s rites of passage with pleasure. “She kissed him; it was glorious. I was almost alive again.”

• She has a close relationship with her father – helps him put the ships in bottles, something her siblings have no interest in.

• Although she is almost upbeat about her death (because in the world of the book she is in heaven) she shows an acute awareness of her loss. “At fourteen, my sister sailed away from me to a place I’d never been. In the walls of my sex there was horror and blood, in the walls of hers there were windows.”

• We are given some indication of Susie’s physical appearance. Her sister Lindsey is described as beautiful and one can assume that there is a family resemblance. Harvey says: “You’re very pretty Susie”

• Susie’s narration has a matter of fact tone and even a black sense of humour. This shows her spunky, intelligent character. Look at the beginning and how she reports her rape. “Don’t, Mr Harvey,” I managed, and I kept saying that one word a lot. Don’t. And I said please a lot too. Franny told me that almost everyone begged “please” before dying.”

• Susie doesn’t want to be dead and she can’t break the chains that bind her to Earth. So we follow her agony as she slowly grieves her own death and says goodbye to the people she loves. On page 301 she describes being with Ray: “To be alive again on this Earth. Not to watch from above but to be – the sweetest thing – beside.... the marvelous weight weighing me down was the weight of a human body....It reverberated, this sound, down the long --tunnel of loneliness and making do with watching the touch and caress of others on Earth. I had never been touched like this. I had only been hurt by hands past all tenderness. But spreading out from earth had been a moonbeam that swirled and blinked on and off – Ray Singh’s kiss. Somehow Ruth knew this.”

• After this Susie accepts that she is dead and can move on. “I was done yearning for them, needing them to yearn for me. Though I still would. Though they still would. Always.”

• She doesn’t dwell on revenge against Harvey but describes his death in a matter of fact way. There is a hint that she caused the icicle to fall. But then she starts the next section with “But now let me tell you about someone special” She is referring to the new baby: Abigail Suzanne.

• She admits that even in heaven, growing up is a lengthy process. She has learnt to let go; to accept but does any human being ever really reach the lofty plateau of the being grown up 100%.

He held out the muddy bracelet as she set down his glass.

“This little girl’s grown up by now,” she said.

Almost.

Not quite.

I wish you a long and happy life.”

Conclusion: Sebold paints a rounded picture of Susie. She is a teenage girl but also a person who has to accept what life has dished out to her and who finds that difficult at times. She is quite heroic but admits to foibles of her own and she was certainly never invincible.

Jack Salmon - As Susie’s father, he feel enormous guilt for having failed to protect his little girl, but he also remains devoted to her memory and actively seeks her appearance in some manner in his life. He is a man who is faced as well with the loss of his wife who leaves the family to resolve her own grief. He then takes over as father and mother to his two remaining children, bearing the burden of their pain as well as his own.

In the aftermath of the murder, Jack deals not only with his own grief and anger but also seeks to assuage Lindsey’s emotions and protect Buckley from the hurt. Like Abigail, Jack must also work through some guilt generated by his daughter’s death. He questions his position as father and protector when he realizes that he was not there to save his child. His frustration at this failure fuels his need to be active in the police investigation. Jack cannot remain passive as the police fail to develop leads. He never wavers in his conviction that Harvey murdered Susie, and once the police disregard his theories, Jack turns to Lindsey, sharing his
thoughts with her. Despite his closeness to Lindsey and Buckley, Jack retains a strong connection to Susie, feeling her presence, talking to her, refusing to let her place in his family's life fade. Whereas Abigail withdraws into almost a state of indifference, Jack builds ties that may bind too tightly. Finally, Jack understands that in order to have a strong family, he must loosen the bonds, and he does what the living must do in order to go on living—let go of the dead. In addition, Jack does what parents must do: let go of their children. Jack can make these moves only after he turns inward and faces his own fears and weaknesses.

He also shows sensitivity and understanding towards his wife. “It was about loving our mother for everything—her brokenness and her fleeing, for being there right then in the moment before the sun rose” pg 280

**Abigail Salmon** - Abigail grieves several things: the loss of her daughter, the collapse of her family, and the loss of the life she never had the opportunity to live.

She is college educated, with a master's degree in literature and aspirations to teach. In the early years of her marriage to Jack, Abigail possessed a passionate nature but found that the demands of motherhood pulled her away from her husband and from her own dreams. As her family grew, Abigail became less involved with her children and husband. Nevertheless, Susie's death unsettles her, and she finds no outlet for her grief. She embarks on an affair with Detective Fenerman but does not love him. Her need to find herself, reclaim her place in the world as an individual, and escape her intense grief propel her to relocate to California. There she seems to find some solace, working in a vineyard and leaving motherhood and wifehood behind. However, she comes to realize that she can leave neither of those things, and when she returns to Pennsylvania, she also realizes that she viewed Susie's death as punishment for own failings as a mother. This understanding allows her to rebuild her relationship with her husband and with her children. These things do not prove easy, but Abigail does reclaim her position within the family, albeit a changed family—reconfigured by Susie's absence as well as by Abigail's.

**Quotations and comments**

- “She had a stare that stretched to infinity” pg 43 & “ocean eyes”
- Contrasts with Ruana Singh but also compares with her. Both are ‘desperate housewives’
- Contrasts with her mother, less feminine, more of a scholar.
- In a way she betrays Jack and Susie by not fighting for justice and by seeking comfort in another. “My father looked at his wife and Len F (pg 135)—“Abigail thinks Len F is right about Harvey” & “And I watched that flat read mouth move across an invisible line that separated her from the rest of the world” & “I saw the chances of Mr Harvey’s capture diminish as I watched the end of my family as I had known it ignite.”
- She did not incorporate motherhood into her life but rather resented it and felt extra guilty when Susie died. “When she realised she was pregnant the third time she sealed the more mysterious mother off”
- Father helped Lindsey shave legs for first time showing how alienated from the family Abigail was.
- “Do you know how alone I've always felt?” To Grandma Lynn: shows that she never really found herself.
- She was hollow and lost and abandoned up
- “I’m not interested”- too cynical and hardened by shock to go to memorial. “I don’t believe she’s waiting out here for us. I don’t think lighting candles .. is honoring her memory. There are other ways to honour it”
- Even Lindsey realises that she is damaged: There was something on the other side of the icy surface & Abigail realises this: “You are doing so well Lindsey you are keeping your father alive.” Abi left for California after a winter in NH didn’t sleep with man 220 “she knew this wasn’t the road out anymore”
- Whenever she went into a shop: no matter how hard she tried to focus on the hopeful unfamiliar, when she walked inside a shop --- she would feel it then creeping up the side of her calves and into her gut, the grief coming, the tears like a small relentless army approaching the front liners of her eyes
- It doesn't mean that the weaker one doesn’t love the stronger – insight
• How could it be that you could love someone so much and keep it secret from yourself as you woke daily so far from home? She had put billboards and roads between then throwing roadblocks behind her and ripping off the rearview mirror and thought that would make him disappear/
• My old room “I love you Susie” – pg 317
• She had needed the time to know that this love would not destroy her and I have given her that time – I had it in great supply pg 318
• She was beginning to wonder how useful her scorched earth policy had been to her all these years. Her mother was loving if she was drunk, solid if she was vain. When was it alright to let go not only of the dead but of the living – to learn to accept? Page 318

Note: this is just a small selection of characters. More to be added later, including minor characters who always have a role to play in a novel.)

Method of narration or point of view
This is another crucial part of a novel. Ken Kesey couldn’t get his famous novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest right until he came up with his narrator, a schizophrenic, mute Indian nicknamed the Chief, whose first person narration gave the reader a sympathetic view of main character McMurphy. Not only that, but it added depth to Kesey’s social criticism of materialistic America and added a sort of breathless style and pace to the book as the Chief poured out his story of McMurphy’s rebellion against the ‘Combine’. To Kill a Mockingbird is an adult novel narrated by a child character while After the First Death had two narrators: Ben a first person narrator and the author, who narrated the third person sections.

The Lovely Bones, narrated by Susie, is of course written in the first person style. However, it differs from the usual first person autobiographical technique. Susie is in heaven and is therefore omniscient or ‘all seeing, all knowing’. Omniscience is usually a feature of the third person ‘eye of God’ technique where the author is all knowing. It was a feature of many classic novels of the nineteenth century. Here, it suits Sebold to have an omniscient narrator who can not only trace the thought processes of the grieving family members but also those of the perpetrator. However, having Susie as the omniscient narrator has many advantages as well as being the novel’s unique selling point. Susie adds another dimension to the story of growing up, grieving, coming to terms with loss because she is uniquely placed to enable us to see the process from many points of view: to truly give us a bird’s eye view as well.

The second sentence is typical first person autobiographical but with a dramatic twist. “I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973.” Sebold adds another factor which can make a first person method more engaging: Susie talks to the reader sometimes. “I wasn’t killed by Mr Botte, by the way. Don’t think every person you’re going to meet is suspect.”

The first chapter shows another advantage of Susie as a narrator. She can narrate the way people talk and tell stories or write in a diary. She goes backwards and forwards in time. In the middle of her account of the rape, for example, she tells how Mr. Harvey addresses her by her name and she is surprised by this. She then relates how her father used to tell people anecdotes about his daughters and that Harvey may have been told one of these. She then moves forward in time to after the murder when Harvey pretended to her mother that he did not know Susie’s name.

In chapters about other characters the narration almost reverts to third person omniscient but Sebold is usually careful to show that we are seeing things from Susie’s point of view. When Lindsey breaks into Harvey’s house, Susie makes her ‘presence’ known to the reader. When Jack is in hospital, Susie maintains that she is there with him and Abigail. “I made myself small in the darkness, unable to know if I could be seen”.

Most moving in my opinion is the last line of the book when Susie once again addresses the reader directly. “I wish you all a long and happy life.” This has many ramifications in the context. Like all good lines it has no clear meaning but sparks a series of thoughts in the reader’s mind. Does she mean that she doesn’t want us to go though what she and her family went through? Does she mean that life is precious, hold onto it? Is she being ironic? We are all going to die and bad things can happen at any time. Yes, it is desirable to have a long and...
happy life but that is not guaranteed so be prepared for anything to happen! Whatever it means, it packs quite a punch coming from a girl killed at 14 who has the generosity to wish us that.

**Style**

Sebold’s language is generally simple as befits the teenage narrator. I feel that a weakness of the book is a slight ‘cheesiness’ in some of the language. However, it often has a down to earth tone and a sincerity that makes it an effective vehicle for the insights the book contains.

**Examples**

Page 267. After Abigail returned, Lindsey had to call her mother ‘Mom’. “It tasted soapy and foreign in her mouth.”

Susie rejoices in the progress her family has made in getting over their grief but she also feels deprived because it was always about her up till now: page 236 “Where was I? Would I be mentioned? Brought up and discussed? Usually now the answer was a disappointing one. It was no longer a Susie-fest on Earth.”

This shows the matter of fact tone of the dead teenage narrator which is also a feature of the style. Sebold skirts on the edge of an (almost heartless?) irony and sarcasm in the writing of the book. However it is off set by a sense of kindness, generosity and honesty in Susie.

**Symbolism: concrete things used to represent abstract ideas.**

Symbolism is used when a writer uses an event, item or a character to stand for something else. Symbols can be characters, such as a character symbolizing good or evil. Objects can also be symbols. People can be symbols, such as Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol. Authors use symbolism, a form of imagery, when they want to portray something to the reader without using the narrator. It is subtle and therefore much less obtrusive.

Symbolism also adds depth because a symbol is suggestive and rarely has a black and white meaning. It ripples with connotations.

Sometimes it is hard to recognise when a key object in a story stops being a prop and starts to take on symbolic properties.

**Some symbolism in the novel**

The ‘lovely bones’ of the title. The phrase is a sort of oxymoron so has a slight shock factor. You have to read the whole book to find out what the lovely bones mean and symbolise. As stated before, Sebold talks about the ‘architecture’ of loss. The ‘bones’ make some reference to Susie’s body but are really a metaphor for the new framework of relationships that form around the loss of a close family member. The family has learned to live with the loss of Susie but their abiding love for her is the skeleton around which their new connections have formed. Abigail has learned to understand, appreciate and tolerate her mother who is very different from her in personality. Jack and Abigail have renegotiated their relationship. Sam has helped Lindsey rebuild her life and so on.

“These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence”

The snow globe. The book is full of images of people being frozen in time or trapped in little worlds, of worlds within worlds. The message of the book seems to be that these worlds can co-exist and not contradict each other. Susie is in her heaven but in some ways in the powerful memories she leaves behind, she is still a part of earth.

The ships in bottles are a symbol of protection and preservation and are smashed when Susie dies because they come to symbolise something impossible when Jack realises he could not protect Susie. The knight and
his lady in the grave rubbings are frozen in time which is a good thing because they are always remembered but a bad thing because they are also static. Jack and Abigail look like two people frozen in ice when Fenerman gives them back the keystone. This set of symbols represents the human tendency to see things as belonging to their own independent spheres as opposed to the links and interconnections between things that seems to be what Sebold believes in. Yes, of course there is a separation between life and death but she seems to be saying that is not as black and white as humans make it out to be.

‘For Sebold, there is neither a perfect heaven nor a perfect world, but there is transparency on all sides. Both realms can be shared because life is a snow globe. To people on both sides of the veil, the dead should be whatever you want them to be: Susie reassures us that her family “would not know when I was gone ... I had become manifest in whatever way they wanted me to become” pg 301

When Fenerman tells Abigail and Jack Susie’s charm was found in a grave near Connecticut, she describes her parents trapped in time and shock for a moment, “like animals trapped in ice – their eyes frozen open and beseeching whoever walked above them to release them now please”

**Snow/Rain.**
Sebold’s use of rain and snow is a traditional literary device, called pathetic fallacy, when the description of the weather matches the emotional environment of the plot.

- The story opens in winter and it is snowing.
- The penguin is trapped in a snow globe which can also represent the world of death.
- The snow covers the evidence of Susie’s murder. Similarly, the emotions of grief are weighed down and buried after the murder.
- After Lindsey and Sam find the beautiful old house, there is a lot of symbolism. It is pouring and they can only cope with the downpour if they strip down to their underwear. Their near naked run is to get back to Jack who gets very anxious when Lindsey is missing. I think this is where he starts to realise that his fear and grief are stifling his living children. Finding the house and running through the cleansing rain represents a new start for the family, a rebirth.
- Near the end of the story, the snow turns to rain and Abigail is finally able to cry

**The keystone charm**
This is more than just an object. It is mentioned several times and seems to represent Susie and her importance to her father. Jack had engraved the keystone with Susie’s name so this particular charm is very representative of Susie herself and the relationship between her and Jack. The keystone is the symbol of her state, Pennsylvania, so grounds her in a particular setting. A keystone also means something indispensable on which the whole structure depends. This fits in nicely with the symbol of the “bones” or “the architecture of loss” and also the metaphor of building and structures that is a motif of the book. Moreover, a tiny object like this from a young girl’s bracelet, found in a grave of another victim, is a poignant symbol of innocence and girlhood. The whole charm bracelet represents Susie and the loss of Susie. The most common edition pf the book uses a modified charm bracelet to symbolise the sadness of Susie’s death: a bracelet with one charm, a two storey house. This visual image combines two or three symbols from the book: the keystone, the bracelet and the house Sam and Lindsey restore.

**The sinkhole**
See notes under setting. This is a resonant symbol of what lies under the surface but will always intrude back into our lives. Susie is dead but the memories of her cannot be suppressed totally. Death is not an absolute end in some ways because there are holes in the unseen boundary line between life and death. Death is not something separate from us but part of the never-ending cycle of birth death and rebirth. Buckley’s garden is like this too. When the tomato plants come up he compares their unfurling leaves to “little hands” coming out of the earth.

**The beautiful old house found by Lindsey and Sam**
This represents the restoration of family life after coming to terms with Susie’s death. There are mentions in the book to the sameness of the houses in the Salmon’s suburb. Their house has the same layout as Harvey’s. Grandma Lynn is surprised that her daughter was satisfied by a suburban house
clone instead of something with style and individuality. It is as though Abigail was such a reluctant housewife that she didn’t care about her house. Susie’s house in heaven is a duplex with a gazebo because he hated her uninteresting house on earth. When the family rebuilds, the house restored by Lindsey and Sam has much more interest and beauty. Not only has the family moved on after Susie’s death, but former issues like a sort of suburban sameness are cast aside.

Critical Overview

The Lovely Bones enjoyed immediate popular success from the time of its publication. The novel, published in June 2002, topped the New York Times bestseller list that summer. Prior to its publication, as Charlotte Abbot notes in Publishers Weekly, bestselling author Anna Quindlen told viewers of the Today Show, "If you read one book this summer, it should be The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold. It’s destined to be a classic along the lines of To Kill a Mockingbird, and it’s one of the best books I’ve read in years." For the most part, the novel garnered excellent reviews after its publications, with critics praising the first person omniscient point of view and the stunning opening pages.

In a review for Christian Century, Stephen H. Webb argues that Sebold’s reworked point of view "is the only way to fully comprehend such an intolerable tragedy [the rape and murder of a fourteen-year-old girl]." Writing for the London Review of Books, Rebecca Mead deems Susie "a bright and ironical observer," and Michiko Kakutani, in her front-page review of The Lovely Bones in the New York Times, points out that the narrator possesses a "matter-of-fact charm." Finally, in his review in the Christian Science Monitor, Ron Charles writes, "The power of The Lovely Bones flows from this voice, a voice at once charmingly adolescent and tragically mature." Most reviewers identify Susie's voice as one of the novel's strong points.

Critics also agree on another of the novel's strengths: the opening pages. Even unfavorable reviews praised Sebold's compelling opening. In Daniel Mendelsohn's review in the New York Review of Books, he likens the novel to TV movies of the week—artificial, contrived, and lightweight. However, Mendelsohn also writes, "The novel begins strikingly…. The few pages that follow … are the best in the book," and he praises the authenticity of these pages. Writing for the Guardian, Ali Smith slams The Lovely Bones for its timidity and sentimentality, but finds "the opening chapters … shattering and dazzling in their mix of horror and normality." Despite a handful of negative reviews, the novel has been the "breakout fiction debut of the year" that Lev Grossman predicted in the book section of the July 1, 2002, edition of Time magazine.

Sebold's novel does, however, exhibit some weaknesses, and even her most ardent admirers recognize them. Kakutani comments that Sebold stumbles in the "highly abstract musing on Susie belonging to a historical continuum of murdered girls and women," and this critic finds the scenes dealing with Susie’s classmate, Ruth Connor’s, "belief that she can … channel Susie’s feelings" unconvincing. Other critics find troubling Susie's return to earth, which Sarah Churchwell of the Times Literary Supplement calls "a false move that violates the contract of willingly suspended disbelief."

Overall, critics believe that the novel's strengths outshine its weak moments. In her Washington Post review, Maria Russo considers The Lovely Bones "utterly original and deeply affecting," and she asserts that Sebold "manages to put her readers into contact with a throbbing pulse of life." Sebold, says Russo, "has an unusual flair for both owning and transforming dark material." Katherine Bouton of the New York Times Book Review concurs. Sebold, she writes, "deals with almost unthinkable subjects with humor and intelligence and a kind of mysterious grace."

Additional commentary:

The Lovely Bones ascended U.S. bestseller lists in the second half of 2002, and stayed on the lists until late 2003. The paperback version of the novel remained a bestseller for many months afterward, and to date more than five million have been sold in the United States. Several reviewers of The Lovely Bones prominently mentioned the broader cultural and religious atmosphere in which it appeared, and the implications of the basic scenario of the novel. The Christian Science Monitor noted that "it's no coincidence that the novel has been
embraced during a period of high anxiety about child abductions,” while Publishers Weekly added that it discusses “a grim, media-exploited subject.” Both of these reviewers, however, believed that Sebold’s novel transcends the sensationalistic and repetitive ways in which child rapes and kidnappings are treated by the media. The Monitor said it explored the “mechanics of rape and murder and grief in a way no news report ever could,” while Publisher Weekly said that Susie’s narrative is animated by the “reminder that life is sweet and funny and surprising” and by the “lithe, resilient prose that by itself delights.”

In commenting on the spiritual element of a novel primarily set in heaven, the Monitor noted that while spiritualism pervades The Lovely Bones, “none of the characters finds solace in anything as dusty as prayer or a sacred text. And as pleasant as Susie’s heaven is, there’s no God there, and certainly no Jesus. This is spirituality for an age that’s ecumenical to a fault.”

The Boston Globe reiterated the Monitor’s praise of Susie’s both “charmingly adolescent and tragically mature” voice by noting that her common and petty teenage concerns help diminish the reader’s awareness of the brutality of her rape and murder. Indeed, the Globe said that Susie’s place in heaven not only compensates for the crimes committed against her, it lets her “live the universal fantasy of finding out what happens after she’s gone.” The Globe’s review goes on to say that Sebold offers “an ode to the living as well as a requiem for the dead,” just as the Monitor had said that “this is as much a story about the dead as about the living.” And, indeed, USA Today declared that Sebold makes “readers feel what her characters feel—in life and death.”

Reviewers did not uniformly praise The Lovely Bones. The New York Times cited “a couple of faltering moments” in the novel, and USA Today added that it “builds a theologically challenging view of heaven, then abandons it for the supernatural.” Michiko Kakutani, writing a second New York Times review, said, “In the latter portions of the novel, Ms. Sebold’s assured narration takes a few stumbles,” including some “portentous and highly abstract musings on Susie belonging to a historical continuum of murdered girls and women.” Nonetheless, a column in the Memphis Commercial Appeal, written after the novel had become a bestseller, seemed to summarize the general critical response in saying that although it could have “used rigorous editing,” The Lovely Bones was “something so resonant and poignant about our humanity that I cannot get it out of my mind.”