

# ANNE FINE

## Introduction

Anne Fine's novels capture the reader right from the start with their fast-paced, realistic approach to issues that impinge on young people's lives.

Themes that she addresses concern the development of the individual – coming of age, gaining confidence, making choices, developing awareness of self and the outside world and taking on responsibility. Usually conveyed through humour, at times dark and uneasy, her novels are shot through with an intellectual quality that commands the reader's total involvement.

Typically, her stories are taut and beautifully crafted, peopled with feisty, complex characters and filled with situations that the reader can relate to.

These notes can be used in a variety of ways. You can choose to focus on one or two books; or to commit some time to a wider study of Anne Fine's work; perhaps with small groups of students concentrating on a different book, then coming together to discuss their work with the rest of class. The books are divided into two categories; those suitable for ages 9 to 12 and those suitable for ages 12+. The notes to accompany the reading of *The Road of Bones* (suitable for ages 12+) are more detailed and would make a particularly good basis for studying this book in isolation; or for studying this book as part of a wider study of politicized literature or as part of a Russian history or politics module. However you choose to approach Anne Fine's work, the result is sure to be rewarding and enjoyable.

## Anne Fine's Work

### Themes

Themes touch upon issues important to young people – growing up, family relationships, elderly relatives, pressures to conform, taking sides, depression and suicide in young people, and living with alcoholism. The stories do not necessarily offer solutions, but draw the reader's attention to ways of coping, extending horizons and opening possibilities to seeing the world in a new way.

### Humour

Humour is based on the observation of human behaviour; the interplay between individuals and the predicament that the characters find themselves in. Often, it is used as a way of getting across a deeper, usually darker, truth.

### Characters

Characters are sharply observed and typically complex, with a mix of good and bad traits. They are also often self-aware and critical of their own behaviour. While they are usually feisty and capable of taking a stance, they are also receptive to other people's points of view and capable of moral growth.

### Plot

Plot is developed through the protagonist's behaviour and the interplay between characters. It is often conveyed through dialogue and opposing viewpoints.

### Setting

Most of the stories are set within a home or school context.

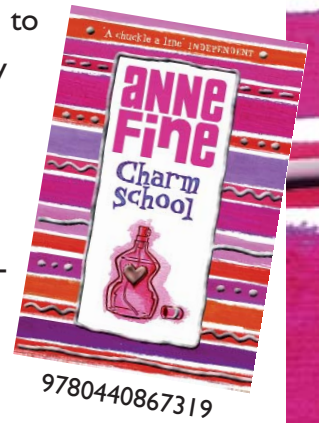
### Openings

The author has a knack of drawing the reader's attention right from the start by plunging straight into the action and introducing the main characters from the opening page.

### Charm School (8+ years)

Highly entertaining, *Charm School* uses exuberant wit, farcical behaviour and exaggeration to put forward a serious theme – the manipulation of young girls into stereotypical roles by the beauty and fashion industry.

Forced to spend the day at Charm School, Bonny comes across a value-system that is totally alien – and at odds – with her own. She finds herself in the midst of a group of simpering, spiteful little girls who are learning to be beauty queens. Groomed by the fluffy-headed, sugary Mrs Opalene, the girls' only concern is to win the beauty pageant and be crowned with the glittering tiara. But Bonny has a mind of her own, and, realizing that Charm School is not for her, offers to help with the lighting and sound system. In control of the stage, she is now in the perfect position to undermine the beauty-queen contest, and its ideology. The story is a satire, awash with humour, mainly derived by ridiculing the idea that girls should be brought up to be passive, concerned with their appearance rather than developing their minds or leading a full life.

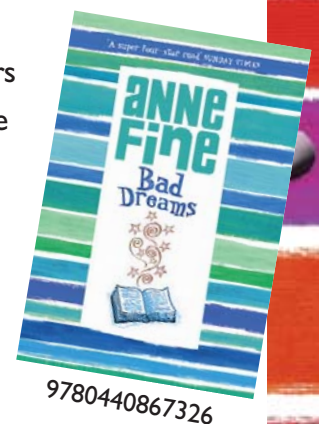


#### Responding to the text

- List the differences in appearance and behaviour between Bonny and The Charm School girls.
- Look at the words the author uses to describe Bonny. For example, she interrupts 'sourly' and replies 'stubbornly' or 'frostily', she argues, scoffs, snaps and challenges. What do these words suggest about her character?
- Write a short description of Mrs Opalene that takes into account the way she looks, talks and acts.
- Working in small groups, can you suggest reasons why Mrs Opalene might believe girls should adopt a passive role in society?
- Do you agree with Bonny and Toby's argument in Chapter Four that the beauty and fashion industry stand most to gain by promoting a stereotypical image of girls?
- The author makes clear her viewpoint on the subject. In what ways does it express itself in her writing?
- Initiate a debate on the role of beauty and fashion in girls' lives today.

### Bad Dreams (8+ years)

A blend of realism and fantasy creates an unnerving, fast-paced story that touches on the supernatural. Mel finds herself reluctantly put in charge of newcomer Imogen, and soon discovers how different they are. For Mel, the class bookworm, is thoroughly self-contained, with little time for her peers and forging new friendships; while Imogen, on the other hand, loathes books, lacks confidence, is constantly on edge and is perceived by everyone as weird. An uneasy friendship develops between the two girls, and Mel soon uncovers the source of Imogen's odd behaviour. Despite her reluctance to be caught up in other people's lives, Mel assumes responsibility for restoring balance in Imogen's life, but at some personal cost.



#### Responding to the text

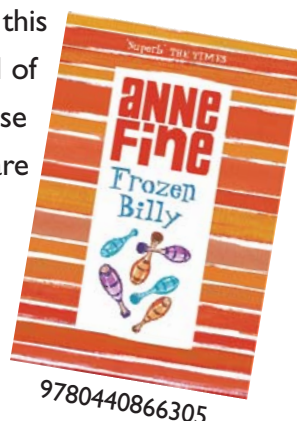
- How does the author catch the reader's attention right from the opening page?
- In what ways do Mel and Imogen differ?
- Why do you think the author has created two such contrasting characters, and how does their interaction trigger the unfolding of events?



- Would you say that Imogen's mother encourages Imogen's 'weirdness'?
- What sort of relationship does Mel have with her mum?
- How does the author build a complex character? Take Mel for example, who has many different aspects to her personality – she lives in her own world of books and the imagination, she is self-contained neither antagonising her peers nor wanting them as friends, reflective, willing to bend the rules but also ready to take the blame. From your reading of other novels by the author, which other character would you describe as complex?

### Frozen Billy (8+ years)

Set around the world of popular entertainment and the music hall in Victorian times, this is the story of a young girl's resolve to rescue her brother from the nightmarish spell of a ventriloquist's dummy. Carrie and her brother Will live with their Uncle Lenny whose dummy, Frozen Billy, fills Carrie with a sense of dread and foreboding – feelings that are justified as the story soon shows. When Uncle Lenny loses popularity with his audiences and squanders the little money they have on drink, the children come up with a scheme to help out which involves Will becoming part of their uncle's performance as Billy's double. But as things take a turn for the worse, Will takes on the personality of the sinister dummy. It's left to Carrie to restore her brother to his former self and to find a solution to their problems.



#### Responding to the text

- How does the author establish a creepy atmosphere right from the start?
- Describe Frozen Billy in your own words.
- In your opinion, what is the scariest feature about Frozen Billy?

### Up On Cloud Nine (10+ years)

Though different in personality and background, Ian and Stolly are the best of friends, having known each other since they were small children. So what were the circumstances that led to Stolly falling from a top-floor window and landing up in hospital in a coma? As Ian sits by Stolly's hospital bed, he tries to piece together the jigsaw of Stolly's life and personality in an attempt to understand why his best friend may have tried to commit suicide.



#### Responding to the text

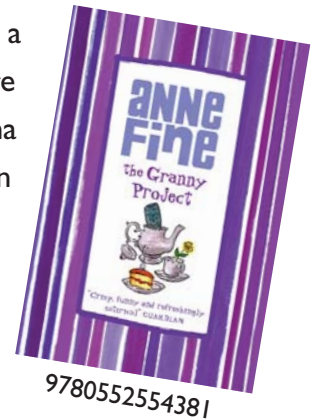
- Ian's Mum says of Stolly, 'People like Stolly, they're so vulnerable, they make people shiver.' What do you think she means by this?
- Can you list some of the characteristics that show that, in depicting Stolly, the author is deliberately putting forward a non-stereotypical image of a teenage boy?
- What is your impression of Stolly?
- In your opinion, which of the two boys, Ian or Stolly, from the point of view of their backgrounds and upbringing, had the more likely chances of finding happiness?
- The author uses a technique known as flashback, which intersperses scenes from the present with those from the past. What effect does this have on the reader? How is this technique used to tell the reader about Stolly?

### The Granny Project (10+ years)

Natasha and Henry Harris are worn out caring for Granny and decide to put her into a home. The children – Ivan, Sophie, Tanya and Nicholas – protest and come up with a plan, led by Ivan and Sophie, to make the parents change their minds. Ivan's plans are more extreme than Sophie's, and soon lead him to emotional blackmail. But Natasha and Henry have their own way of dealing with the children – and turn the tables on Ivan.

#### Responding to the text

- At first Natasha is presented to the reader as harsh and uncaring in her treatment of Granny. Yet by the end of the story, we see her in a different light. How does the author achieve this?
- Natasha says of her children, Ivan and Sophie, 'There are all sorts of people in the world. You are one sort and Ivan is another'. What does she mean?
- What is the meaning of the Russian proverb that Henry quotes to Sophie, 'The further into the woods you go, the more trees you will find'?

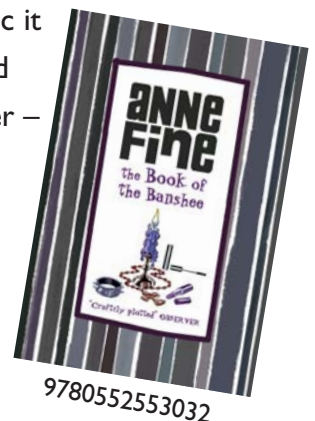


### The Book of the Banshee (10+ years)

This is a hilarious and sharply observed account of teenage behaviour and the havoc it wreaks on family life. Will is a happy-go-lucky type of boy who lets life move around him. But when his sister Estelle turns overnight into a screaming, rebellious teenager – a shrieking banshee – he defends himself as best he can. Inspired by an author visit and the book he is reading, a moving account of life in the trenches during World War I written by someone his age, he starts to record his experiences of war, caught on the frontline at home. As he writes his story, it soon becomes apparent that Will too is changing, becoming more assured and self-confident as he writes about his experiences and feelings.

#### Responding to the text

- Write a character description of Estelle.
- In what way has Will changed by the time he's completed writing his book?
- In small groups, discuss whether you agree with Miss Adulewebe's view on how best to start writing, 'Sit down and pick up your pen, and after that it's downhill all the way'. What other ingredient does this story show that you need in order to write?
- What did you find out about war in the trenches from William Scott Saffery's account?



### On the Summerhouse Steps (10+ years)

This is one of the author's most straightforwardly humorous stories on friendship, yet interspersed among the comic elements are glimpses of serious, larger themes such as coming to terms with loss, and hunger in the Third World.

It is the beginning of the summer holidays and Ione is mooching about in the summerhouse, at a loss about what to do next. Then the wildly eccentric student





Ned Hump bursts on the scene declaring his love for Caroline, secretary to lone's father Professor Muffet. lone instantly warms to him, and from this moment, her life takes on a new direction. What follows is a very funny, at times slapstick, and sharply observed comedy of manners.

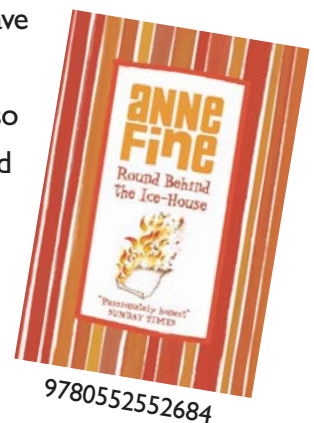
As the idyllic summer drags on – and greenness and growth give way to drought and bareness – lone dreams of another Ned, one who lives in her imagination but could well exist in a country of poverty and starvation, where the rains never come.

### Responding to the text

- Detailed description of a character's physical appearance often reveals the character's personality. List some of Ned's physical traits then write a description of his personality.
- Can you find references in the text to support the argument that lone changes from being lonely and unsure to someone who acts on events and influences the lives of those around her?
- Which other characters change, and in what way?
- The author introduces sadder, reflective moments into the comedy. What effect does this have on the comic aspect and on the overall story?

### Round Behind the Ice-House (12+ years)

This is a story of growing up and changing loyalties. Cass and Tom are twins, who have shared and done everything together. But Cass is now changing and wants her independence, a state of affairs that leaves Tom puzzled and confused. All the more so since he's becoming bewildered by his own feelings for Lisa, the twins' life-long friend and daughter of the much-loathed farm-hand, Jamieson. The story, told from Tom's point of view, is introspective and moody, filled with a sense of menace and foreboding that is brilliantly sustained to the end of the story.



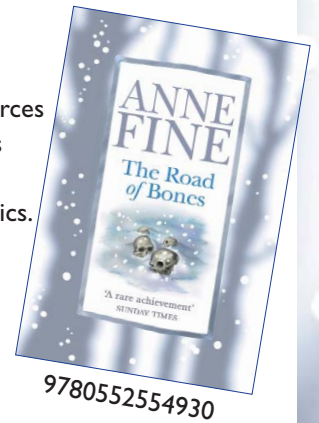
### Responding to the text

- The plot of a story is usually made up of the following stages: exposition, complication, climax and resolution. Can you divide this story into these four elements?
- Look at the way the author introduces the themes in the opening paragraph. What does it suggest that the book is about?
- Working in pairs, take it in turns to list each other's good and bad qualities, and then swap lists. Does your partner see you in the same way as you see yourself?
- The title of a story tells the reader about the contents. In what way is the setting, the ice house, important to this story?
- Make a list of the words and phrases that are used to describe Jamieson. How do these descriptions help to create mood?
- Which events justify Tom's assessment of Lisa and Cass, 'At least my sister goes after things that she cares about, and goes after them hard. I sometimes wonder whether Lisa will ever care very much about anything'?

## The Road of Bones (12+ years)

*The Road of Bones* is a powerful work of fiction, stark in its realism and bleak in its conclusion, which demands the reader's total involvement through its compelling storytelling and the issues it raises.

By tracing the story of one young man caught up in a nightmare world of violence and repression, it forces the reader to reflect on important truths – the role of politics and ideology, the manipulation of beliefs and the way tyrants are created. Its contents make it ideally suited to classroom debate, intended to develop young people's awareness of political systems and to explore their personal responses to politics.



### Synopsis

*The Road of Bones* follows the trajectory of one person whose life is shaped by the brutal society in which he lives. A study of totalitarianism, based loosely on Russia's history under Stalin during the 1930s, the story is a stark reminder of what happens to a society when citizens lose their rights.

Yuri lives with his parents and grandmother in an overcrowded apartment block in a small town. Fear has fallen over the country, and everywhere there is silence and suspicion. There are show trials and purges as one leader usurps another in a struggle for power.

Yuri's parents avoid all talk of politics for fear of being overheard, while his grandmother, who experienced life under the Czars, talks mainly in metaphors and proverbs. Yuri is puzzled, unable to piece together the jigsaw of beliefs that he hears and observes within the family.

The day soon comes when Yuri's school is closed and the pupils ordered to report to the work commissar in accordance with the Great Economic Plan. They're sent to a building site where they work under conditions of slavery from five in the morning until late at night, with little food and no break. It is here that he watches his best friend die – and learns his first political lesson – that the individual counts for nothing in a system that glorifies the state. Shortly after, he is on the run, escaping from the dreaded men in uniform – the secret police – whose silver badge of a coiled serpent is the symbol of ruthlessness. And Yuri's crime? He allowed the grief he felt at his friend's death to be heard by his comrades, one of whom was an informer.

He makes his escape – and so begins a journey, trodden by so many, that eventually takes him to the forced labour camps, or *gulags*, of Siberia and the frozen north. But Yuri is a fighter and the instinct for survival carries him through the horrors of what he is forced to endure.

By the end of the book, his political education is complete, and he is ready to fight back in the only way he knows – through violence and intimidation. And so the vicious wheel is complete. The child that began the journey is now a man, ready and capable of inflicting the same merciless savagery that he once suffered.

### Responding to the text

- Judging by the title, and not having read the book, what do you expect the book to be about?
- What is the meaning of Grandmother's proverb, 'Only a fool cheers when the new prince rises'?
- Why do you suppose the author chose to write this book as a first-person narrative? What effect does this have on the reader?
- Prepare a chart of the events that were to shape the sort of person that Yuri becomes by the end of the book.
- What are some of Yuri's personality traits that show him to be a complex character?
- Does Yuri's behaviour towards Maria and Igor show that he has conflicting feelings for them? Justify your answer with reference to the text.
- How would you interpret the character, Nikolai? Do you think that he was forced to change because of his experiences during the course of the story or that Yuri's initial assessment of him as a friend and a rebel was wrong?
- Descriptions of place and weather conditions play an important part in this book. What is their purpose? Do they reinforce mood?

### Setting the story in a political context

The book sets the story in its political and historic context by offering different ideological viewpoints expressed within one family and through three generations. There is Grandmother, who looks back with nostalgia at life under Czarism, an era when religion was tolerated. Then there is Yuri's mother, who supported the glorious revolution, believing it would establish a just and equitable society. Finally, there is Yuri, whose political views are gradually shaped by the atrocities he experiences and witnesses at the hands of a tyrannical regime that turned the revolution into a lie.

### Learning about politics

In presenting political truths in the guise of fiction, *The Road of Bones* helps to inform young people about the nature of politics and its effects on the ordinary citizen. Used as a starting point for discussion, the book allows young people to:

- Learn about the nature of totalitarian regimes
- Understand the impact of totalitarianism on the life of ordinary citizens
- Find out how people respond to state institutions in an undemocratic context
- Understand the importance of having strong democratic institutions
- Appreciate the value of political opposition and public debate
- Learn how to identify abuse of power in democratic and undemocratic contexts.

## Totalitarianism

Essential features of a totalitarian state are in place in this book:

- The suppression of the individual under collectivism
- The subordination of human rights to the needs of a single party
- The outlawing of free speech and freedom of the press
- Annexation of lands and subjugation of peoples
- Constant propaganda and indoctrination
- Glorification of the leader

## Discussion points

A discussion of issues raised in the book will develop young people's awareness of politics and provide them with insights and ideas that they can then relate to their own experiences.

### *People's behaviour under totalitarianism*

The book offers many examples of the way people act under totalitarianism.

- How would you answer Yuri's question to old Maria, 'How can whole villages full of people allow themselves be tormented by so few'?
- Early on in the story, Yuri's mother states that people who have been arrested must have done something wrong. Do you agree with this view?
- In Chapter Three, Yuri's father warns him to keep his eyes down and his ears closed, explaining that the only way to stay alive is to mind one's own business and pretend not to hear or see anything. Is this attitude reasonable or morally justifiable?
- If, like Maria, you only had a few chicken eggs to keep you alive, would you have kept them hidden from Yuri?

### *Love of country*

- In Chapter Two, Grandmother, in referring to her childhood, describes the people's love of their country. What incidences in the book show that this love of country has been distorted and manipulated by the leaders of the regime?
- At what moment would you say that love of country turns into nationalism?

### *Famine*

Central to the story is the issue of famine, and the way that its causes are often man-made. While fleeing from the secret police, Yuri boards a train bound for the next province, where he overhears the two brothers Maxim and Misha discussing the fate of agrarian communities. Throughout the book there are further passages that describe how rich and fertile land can be turned into waste through ignorance, ineptitude and deliberate policy-making.

- Can you list some of the human factors that are responsible for bringing about famine?

### *Requisitioning of property*

Much of the book centres on the fate of the peasants as the country sets in motion a policy to grow its industrial base. The old couple, Igor and Maria, live in poverty, their land requisitioned, or forcefully removed, and given to the state.

Under Stalin, requisitioning of land took place on a large scale. Peasants were forcefully removed from their holdings and sent to labour camps or the large industrial cities.

- Why is the forceful removal of people from their land unjust, even if it is carried out in order to achieve national prosperity?
- In your opinion, is the forceful removal of people from their land likely to achieve the objective of national prosperity?

### *Yuri's response to totalitarianism*

- Why, at the end of the book, does Yuri decide to rebel against the system? Was he a victim and therefore had no other choice? Would you have reasoned as he did?
- By the end of the book, Yuri believes that the only way to respond to the regime's atrocities is through force. Derailing a train, for example, is something that he justifies. Is his behaviour questionable? If you were in his position what would you do?



## Widening political horizons

- What is meant by the phrase, 'the end justifies the means'? Can you find examples of the way some governments use this phrase to justify their policies?
- Why do you suppose that people are passive and indifferent under totalitarianism? Is it a question of fear or the wish to remain uninvolved? Maybe it is the wish to conform?
- In your opinion, what are the social and economic factors that pave the way towards totalitarianism?
- At the end of the book, Yuri justifies his argument for tyranny with the words, 'So everyone must join the struggle, and those who weren't with us ... might as well be against us.' Do you agree with his reasoning, that if you don't embrace a cause, you are against it?
- How does *The Road of Bones* help us to understand that we are not born with an innate value system, and that good citizenship is something that we learn from experience – our own and that of others?

## Bringing politics closer to home

- Look at the difference between someone like Yuri, whose youth is taken up with political issues, and a young person in the UK, whose concerns are more likely to involve school, sports and leisure activities. Does the political regime we live under determine the way we grow up?
- Can you imagine a situation in our democracy when the government would be justified in requisitioning people's property? Would war or any other national emergency justify this policy?
- The following institutions were lacking in Yuri's country:
  - Free press
  - Political parties
  - Parliament
  - Courts of law

Had these institutions been place, what difference would they have made?

- Given the absence of the institutions listed above, would you say that Yuri's approach to politics is justifiable? If not, how would you advise him to respond to the brutalities of the regime?
- What do you know about peaceful disobedience? Would it have been feasible to think about peaceful disobedience in Yuri's country?
- Politics is forbidden under a totalitarian regime, yet everything an individual does has political consequences, usually devastating for that person. Yuri is sentenced to ten years' hard labour after giving an incorrect answer to a question during Study Circle. Would you expect punishment for giving a wrong answer to a question?
- Would you agree that Yuri's reflections on his parents and their behaviour are determined by political events, and that he judges his parents by their response to the government? Can you imagine this ever happening in your family circumstances?
- 'No one's arrested for no reason at all', is Yuri's mother's initial reaction to the wave of arrests. Is arrest a confirmation of guilt? Are there countries today where this assumption is considered valid?
- What happens to a judicial system when the defence lawyers are too terrified to argue against the prosecution?
- After reading the book, would you say that the use of repression and doing away with civil liberties are likely to achieve a government's aims?
- Does the story leave you with an interest in becoming politically involved? If so, how? Would you wish to ensure that democratic institutions remain healthy?
- Do you believe that you can make a difference to the politics of your country?



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