

READING GUIDE FOR

# *Birdsong*

by SEBASTIAN FAULKES



## In Detail

# Questions for in-depth discussion

### PAST and PRESENT

*'No child or future generation will ever know what this was like. They will never understand. When it is over we will go quietly among the living and we will not tell them.'* (p. 422)

The novel is divided between Stephen's experiences from 1910 to 1918 and his granddaughter Elizabeth's life in 1978. How effective is this structure? Does it help to emphasise any of the themes of the book as a whole? Does it make you look at the past differently? Would you agree that this technique is a device used to emphasise the complacency of subsequent generations toward significant events that preceded their lives?


Look at the character of Elizabeth. What elements of history are repeated in her life? Is she seeking resolution by naming her child John or honouring the memory of her grandfather and his comrade? What do you think the birth of John represents?

### LOVE and RELATIONSHIPS

*'It is right. You know it's right. It's as right as anything can ever be. Isabelle, I understand you. Believe me. I understand you. I love you.'* (p. 57)

*'Because I love you. Can't you see that? From all that's gone wrong I want to make something good. We must try.'* (p. 431)

Consider the representation of love in the novel. How do Stephen's feelings towards Isabelle change as the novel progresses? How does Stephen's failed relationship with Isabelle in Part One affect him as the novel progresses? What differences are there between Stephen's relationships with Isabelle and with Jeanne? Compare Elizabeth's love life with Stephen's.



*'Soon the war will be over and I will be home again to look after you. With love from your husband, Jack.'* (p. 223)

Look at Jack Firebrace's letters to his wife Margaret – what differences do you note in them as Jack's time at the Front passes by?

*'I know you go out on patrol with them and bind up their wounds and so on. But do you love them? Will you give your own life for them?'* (p. 164)

Stephen is described at the beginning of the war as a cold character with an indifference towards his colleagues. Why do you think this is so? Does his character change as the war progresses? Would you consider his 'cold character' a result of Isabelle's treatment of him? What do you think about his relationship with Weir?

## NATURE

*'The war lifted from him. It is just a piece of field beneath French heaven, he thought. There are trees beyond the noise, and down in the valley is the fish-filled river.'* (p. 227)

*'He wanted to stretch out his arms and enfold in them the fields, the sky, the elms with their sounding birds.'* (p. 363)


Stephen embraces his natural environment, from the front line on French soil to the English countryside he visits when on leave. Are there comparisons to be made between the descriptions of nature at the front line and those of the natural environment elsewhere? To what extent would you agree that the natural world presents a cruel reminder of life carrying on irrespective of the war? Consider the symbolism of birdsong and Faulks's choice of title for this novel.

## FAITH

*'He thought: I will not let this shake my faith. His life was a beautiful thing, it was filled with joy. I will thank God for it.'* (p. 209)

*'Horrocks pulled the silver cross from his chest and hurled it from him. His old reflex still persisting, he fell to his knees, but he did not pray. He stayed kneeling with his palms spread out on the ground, then lowered his head and covered it with his hands. Jack knew what had died in him.'* (p. 230)

Faith and religion are constant themes throughout *Birdsong* – discuss the portrayal of these with reference to individual characters. How does Jack



Firebrace's faith and view of God compare to Stephen's? How does the war alter their beliefs? What does Isabelle believe in? Is Weir really devoid of belief?

Look at the conversation Stephen has with Weir and Ellis (pp. 295–7) What is Stephen's attitude to the spiritual world and what effect does it have on Ellis and Weir?

## MORALITY and THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

*'It was not all the tens of thousands of deaths that mattered; it was the way they had proved that you could be human yet act in a way that was beyond nature.'* (p. 234)

Would you agree that *Birdsong* is an insight into the apparent ability of humans to cope with the horrors of war and to do so without question? Are you shocked by the behaviour of any of the characters? Does Stephen's view of the war dehumanise his colleagues? Does the portrayal of men at the front line challenge your views or opinions of war?

Consider the last section of the novel when Stephen and Jack are trapped underground and eventually rescued by Levi and his fellow German soldiers. What is the significance of this episode – is it a satisfying conclusion to the war? Does it represent a return to a 'normal' moral code of what is right or wrong? Is it evidence of how weary of war the soldiers have become?

## HOME

*'I have no home in England. I wouldn't know where to go. Would I loaf around in Piccadilly Circus? Should I go to the seaside in Cornwall and sit in a little cottage? I'd rather stay in France. I like it here.'* (p. 190)

*'Only Margaret, and I couldn't talk to her any more. Too much has happened.'* (p. 471)

Stephen frequently seems to be a lost soul, with no home in England or France to speak of. Do you sympathise with his situation? Is life easier for him than for men with a normal home life? How does Stephen's period of leave in England compare to Weir's? Would you consider Elizabeth to be a lost soul?



## In Brief

# Questions for general discussion

- Is Jeanne the real heroine of *Birdsong*?
- What do you think about the presentation of war in *Birdsong*?
- Discuss the past/present structure of the novel. Is the function of Elizabeth and the events in 1978 to seek and show redemption for her grandfather Stephen and his fellow comrades?
- Is *Birdsong* an exploration into human behaviour – its boundaries, beliefs and the power of the human spirit?
- What is the significance of ‘home’ and the ‘idea of home’ in this novel? Consider this theme with reference to the different characters.



## Further Reading and Related Works

### FICTION

*Captain Corelli's Mandolin* by Louis de Bernières

*Regeneration* by Pat Barker

*A Very Long Engagement* by Sébastien Japrisot

*All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque

*Strange Meeting* by Susan Hill

*Living, Loving and Party Going* by Henry Green

*Crome Yellow* by Aldous Huxley

*First World War Poems* edited by Andrew Motion

*Journey's End* by R. C. Sherriff

### NON-FICTION

*Forgotten Voices of the Great War* by Max Arthur