

BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

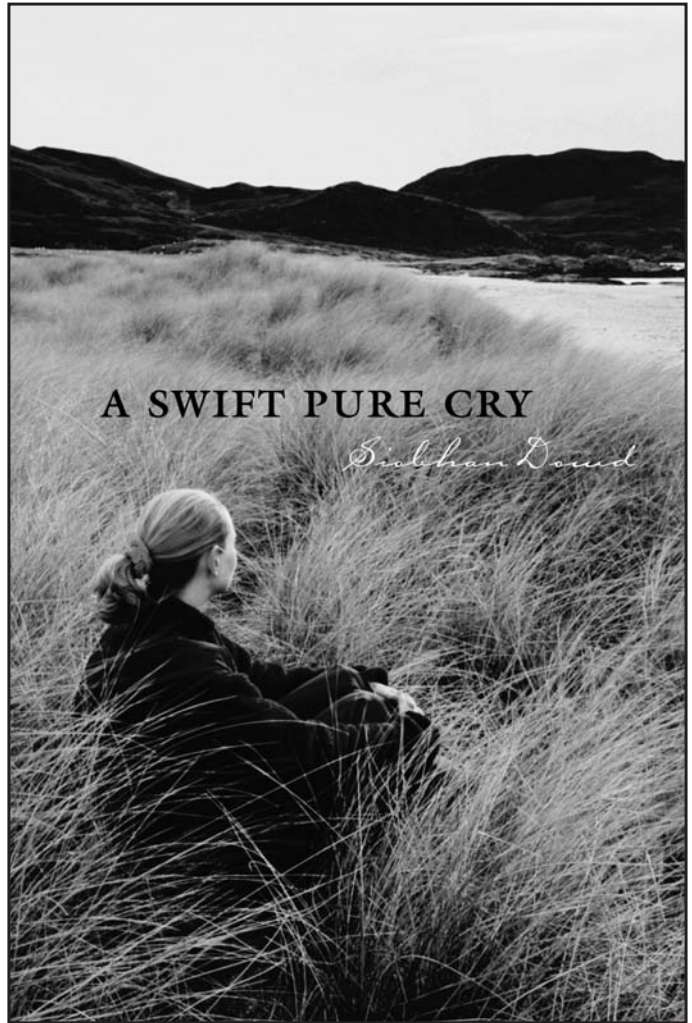
thematic connections

**Courage • Abandonment
Friendship • Family
Grades 7 up**

about the book

Fifteen-year-old Shell Talent assumes the role of mother to her two younger siblings after her mother dies and her father turns to alcohol, but her unexpected pregnancy catalyzes great change in her community and country.

Ireland, 1984. After Shell's mother dies, her father gives up on work and his children and escapes reality by drinking. The unexpected challenge of caring for a home and her two siblings leaves Shell little opportunity to enjoy her youth. She frequently skips school just to spend time with her only friends, Birdie and Declan. But when Birdie leaves town to live with her aunt, Declan and Shell's friendship evolves into intimacy until he flees to America, leaving Shell pregnant. Scandal erupts in the community; a baby boy is found dead in a cave, and Shell admits to giving birth to a stillborn daughter. Two babies dead, and no one knows the father of both is Declan, and no one knows the baby boy's mother is Birdie—no one, that is, except Shell.



David Fickling Books HC: 978-0-385-75108-7 (0-385-75108-7)
GLB: 978-0-385-75109-4 (0-385-75109-5)

**"It soared, a bird,
it held its flight,
a swift pure cry"**

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

pre-reading activity

News reports often surface of babies being abandoned shortly after birth. This book deals with two infants dying at birth under different circumstances. Ask students to find a newspaper article about an infant who has been abandoned and bring it to class. After they have read the news reports, discuss the causes and effects of these deaths. Ask the class to find services in their community that can help pregnant women and young mothers.

questions

- When Birdie sees Shell and Declan kissing, why does she only blame Shell? What role does Shell play in Declan's betrayal of Birdie? Why does Birdie refuse to speak to Shell? How does Birdie's betrayal of Shell affect each of them?
- As Shell's father grows more distant and turns increasingly to alcohol, Shell begins to assume more responsibility for Trix and Jimmy. From what is her father trying to escape?
- Young Shell must cope with a secret pregnancy, the care of her two siblings, her father's neglect, and her mother's death. What character traits does Shell possess that enable her to handle all that life has thrown at her?
- Shell does not think she has anyone to support her when she discovers she is pregnant. Why is she so fearful of asking anyone for help? Who could have helped her?
- When Rose is born, Shell either does not realize or is unwilling to accept the fact that Rose is dead. How does Jimmy help Shell understand that Rose is dead? Why does Shell assume the responsibility for Rose's death? Could Rose have been saved?
- Why does Shell's father confess to a crime he did not commit? Why does he think he is guilty? How does his admission of a crime he didn't commit help Shell communicate with him? How does it alter their relationship?
- What impact does Father Rose have on Shell? How does he help her through a difficult time? How does he fail her? What factors influence Father Rose to leave the priesthood?
- The people in the community are devastated to learn that two babies in their community have been found dead. How could the police have better handled the cases? What role do the gossips play in Shell's arrest? Besides Shell, who knew the identity of the parents of the baby boy? Was his death intentional?

for group discussion

- When Shell receives the letter from Declan, why does she burn it? Why doesn't she answer it and reveal to him all the devastation he left behind?
- To what does the author refer with the term "a swift pure cry" on page 135? The title of the book is taken from a chapter called "Sirens" in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*: "It soared, a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar, silver orb it leaped serene, speeding, sustained to come . . . of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about the all, the endlessnessnessness." How can the quotation be used to interpret the title of the book?



Jacket photograph © 2007 by Getty Images

writing activities

- Shell receives a letter from Declan telling of his adventures and life in America, but Shell burns the letter and does not respond to it. Ask students to assume Shell's character and to write a letter to Declan, telling him of the destruction in the wake of his departure.
- Shell is a complex character for a 15-year-old girl and deals with almost insurmountable obstacles. Ask each student to select an event in Shell's life and to write a diary entry about that event, including Shell's personal feelings about what is happening. Then assemble the entries to make a complete diary of Shell's life.

related titles

by theme



Keeper of the Night

Kimberly Willis Holt

Family & Relationships • Death, Dying & Grief
Hope • Coming of Age

Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-553-49441-9 (0-553-49441-4)



The Lightkeeper's Daughter

Iain Lawrence

Death, Dying & Grief • Family & Relationships
Making Choices

Grades 9 up

Delacorte PB: 978-0-385-73127-0 (0-385-73127-2)

Delacorte HC: 978-0-385-72925-3 (0-385-72925-1)

GLB: 978-0-385-90062-1 (0-385-90062-7)



A Door Near Here

Heather Quarles

Disabilities & Illness • Divorce & Single Parent Families
Family & Relationships • Contemporary Issues/Social
Problems • Responsibility

Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-22761-8 (0-440-22761-5)



Deep

Susanna Vance

Girl Interest • Contemporary Issues/Social Problems
Mystery & Suspense

Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-23842-3 (0-440-23842-0)



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about the author

Siobhan Dowd was named one of the top 100 Irish Americans by *Irish-America Magazine* and AerLingus for her global anti-censorship work with the writers' organization PEN. *A Swift Pure Cry* is her first novel. She lives in Oxford, England.

internet resources

Answers.com

www.answers.com/topic/infanticide

Definitions of infanticide.

Alexandra Kennedy

www.alexandrakennedy.com

Recovery from the grief of losing a parent.

March of Dimes

www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/681_1159.asp

Facts about teen pregnancy.

Mayo Clinic

[www.mayoclinic.com/health/alcoholism/](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alcoholism/DS00340/DSECTION=2)

DS00340/DSECTION=2

Causes and symptoms of alcoholism.

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