



# Barrington Stoke

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION GUIDE



# MALORIE BLACKMAN

## Jon for Short

- PART 1** Synopsis & Themes
- PART 2** Chapter-by-Chapter Exploration
- PART 3** Extension Activity: Art & Illness
- PART 4** About Malorie Blackman

## PART I SYNOPSIS & THEMES

This guide has been produced to provide ideas for guiding less confident readers through Malorie Blackman's **Jon for Short**, a brilliant short novel with powerful themes. The novel is well-structured for use in developing inference and prediction skills. The guide is therefore written to be used during a first reading of the text.

A synopsis and overview of themes is followed by chapter-by-chapter suggestions for discussion points designed to develop reading comprehension strategies, including prediction and inference skills. Suggested activities are intended to further understanding of the text and/or provide opportunities for speaking, listening and writing work. There is also a brief author biography.

We hope you enjoy using these materials with your students.

**Jon for Short** is a first-person narrative with an extremely unreliable narrator. It opens on a flashback of a knife attack. This is revealed to be the nightmare of a young man in hospital. The young man is very confused and unsure of the difference between dreaming and waking. The nightmare repeats time and time again, with incremental additions. It is tied to some incident the boy cannot remember.

The second time the boy wakes, he is in terrible pain because the hospital have taken his left arm. He reveals that his right arm was taken earlier, although he cannot remember when. It becomes clear that he is being kept sedated much of the time. After one episode of sedation, he wakes to discover that his legs are gone too.

The staff in the hospital show varying degrees of hostility to their patient. Nurse Hill appears almost to pity him, saying that it might have been better for him had he died. Nurse Barrett and a porter clearly dislike him – in fact, he disgusts them. They, and his doctor, insist on calling him 'Joseph' or 'Joe', which distresses him as he maintains his name is Jonathon, or 'Jon for short'.

Dr Black insists that no one has taken her patient's limbs and both she and Nurse Hill try to make him feed himself. Nurse Hill becomes angry at what she calls his 'act'.

Eventually the nightmare reaches a resolution of sorts, but it appears to end with the boy standing over a bed in which he sees himself lying, and then killing this version of himself. Dr Black reveals that the boy is Joe, and that he is in hospital because he killed his twin brother, Jon. Horrified, Joe sits up and covers his ears, proving that his legs and arms are not gone at all. He becomes very distressed and is sedated. The nightmare comes again, but this time it segues into a memory of standing over his dying brother, who calls him Joe.

When Joe wakes, he thinks he is Jon again and believes that the doctors have taken his whole body, except his head. He has no memory of the events that brought him to the hospital.

Despite its short length, **Jon for Short** deals with big themes. It is clear that Joe is suffering from incapacitating mental illness, induced or exacerbated by his guilt over the killing of his twin. His personality has fragmented and he believes he is the murdered twin. He is inflicting tremendous pain on his body with his mind. He has blanked out the crisis that led to his incarceration, although he cannot keep it out when under sedation.

## PART 2 CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER EXPLORATION

### FRONT COVER

Look at the **Cover** of **Jon for Short**. What does the group think the story will be like? Tick any that apply:

- Funny
- Happy
- Scary
- Violent
- Sad
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What clues does the jacket give to help them decide on their answers?

When a story is scary or violent or nasty, we say that it is a dark story. Is there anything about the jacket that makes the group think of darkness?

### CHAPTER 1

#### Funny Fonts

Does the group notice anything unusual about the font in this section? It is in italics – this means that the letters lean to the right a little.

Writers use italics for many different things. Italics can emphasis a section, or they can tell us that the section is a character's thoughts, or a memory or flashback, or a dream, or in some other way different to the rest of the text.

Why does the group think that **Chapter 1** of **Jon for Short** is in italics? Record their ideas.

## Different Senses

Good writers help the reader feel like he or she is part of the action. One way to do this is to conjure up the effects the scene would have on the reader's five senses if he or she were there. The author can describe smells, sounds, feelings, sights and tastes. In this section, which of these does Malorie Blackman describe?

## A Good Beginning?

Does the group understand exactly what is going on in **Chapter 1**? Does this make them want to read on, or not?

## CHAPTER 2

Read **P3**.

## Who am I?

The narrator of a book is the person who tells the story.

The two most common types of narrator are:

First-person narrators. These are usually the main character within the story. They tell the story from their own point-of-view and they can 'see' inside their own heads. They use the words 'I' and 'me' to refer to themselves, e.g. 'It all started when I got up on Sunday morning.'

Third-person narrators. It can be harder to say 'who' these narrators are! They tell the story from a different point-of-view to the point-of-view of the characters and they can 'see' inside the heads of many characters. They call the characters 'he', 'she,' and so on, e.g. 'It all started when Catherine and John got up on Sunday morning.'

Read the **First Page of Jon for Short**.

Does **Jon for Short** have a first-person narrator, or a third-person narrator? How do you know?

On **P3** we learn that the narrator is very confused. He can hear voices inside and outside his head. Someone says it might have been better if he had died.

Where does the group think the narrator might be? Under what circumstances might a person say it might have been better had another person died? Is it usual for a person to confuse dreaming and waking? When is it most likely that a person might do this?

**Record the group's ideas of where the narrator might be. Then read P5, 6 & 7. Were they right?**

Look at **P6**. The narrator says that the nurse's smile is 'a thin slash across her face'.

What does the group think the narrator means by this? Is it a pleasant and positive image, or an unpleasant and negative image? Do they think the nurse likes the narrator, or not? Is it unusual for a nurse to be less than kind to his or her patients?

Read to the **end of the chapter** and review the group's guesses as to why the author used italics in **Chapter 1**.

Do they know now why she does this?

Can the group spot any difference between the dream in **Chapter 1** and the dream in **Chapter 2**?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY – METAPHORS AND SIMILES

Writers can help readers form pictures in their mind by using images. When we form an image by saying that one thing is **like** another thing, we are using a **simile**. When we do *not* use the word **like** to link two things to form an image, we are using a **metaphor**.

On **P7** Malorie Blackman uses a **simile** – 'the bad dream came at once and washed me away **like** a tidal wave'.

Can you make up your own **similes** using these starters?

- o Her golden hair was like \_\_\_\_\_
- o His face was angry like \_\_\_\_\_
- o The motorbike made a buzzing noise like \_\_\_\_\_

On **P6** Malorie Blackman uses a **metaphor** – 'her lips were a thin slash across her face'.

**Try to link these half sentences to make metaphors:**

- o Her eyes were \_\_\_\_\_ a snowy wave in the sea of black hats.
- o I could see his white hair, \_\_\_\_\_ a shiny billiard ball.
- o He rubbed his bald head, \_\_\_\_\_ two pools of blue, full of sadness.

## CHAPTER 3

Read **P11**.

In this section the boy says his arm has 'been taken'. Why might a person's arm be cut off?

The boy says that his left side 'roared with pain'. What is unusual about this image? 'Roar' suggests a sound – does this link to the sense we normally think of when we think of pain? Has any of the group ever experienced pain so bad that either their hearing or their sight has been affected?

The boy doesn't remember how he ended up 'in this place'. Where does the group think 'this place' is? Is it a hospital? Are there any other places where doctors and nurses work?

Read **P12**

There are two similes on this page. Can the group find these?

Read **P13**

Does this seem like a hospital? Why/why not?

Read to the **End of the Chapter**

List all of the information the group has picked up from the story so far, e.g.:

- o Jon has dreams about a knife attack
- o Jon has lost his memory
- o Some of the staff do not like Jon

Using all of this information, what do they think has happened to leave Jon in the hospital?

## CHAPTER 4

Read to the **End of P19**

The doctor who is coming to see Jon is a psychiatrist. What do psychiatrists do? Who do they look after?

Does the fact that Jon has a psychiatrist change any of the group's idea of what might have happened to leave him in the hospital?

Read **P20 & P21**

What does the group think is going on here? Have the staff got Jon's name wrong, or is Jon wrong and is he really Joe? Think about what the group knows about Jon and what they know about the staff. Which is more likely?

Read **P22 & P23**

What does it mean to 'pull the wool over someone's eyes'?

What does Dr Black think of Nurse Barrett? What is the group's evidence?

Read **P24 & P25**

Why does the group think Jon /Joe falls asleep so quickly, even though he doesn't want to?

Read **P26 & P27**

How does the dream differ this time? Does it help the group to understand any more about what may have happened?

## CHAPTER 5

Read the **Whole Chapter**

What does the group think is going on here? Jon/Joe says the staff are taking his legs and arms, but Dr Black says they're not. Who does the group think is right?

Dr Black says that Jon is really Joe but Jon says he is Jon. Who does the group think is right?

First-person narrators do not always tell the truth. The way they tell the story is always the way they see events. Sometimes they lie to the reader on purpose. Sometimes they lie because they think the lie is true. We call narrators who don't tell the truth unreliable narrators.

Does the group think that Jon/Joe is an unreliable narrator?

- No – there is evidence that he knows what the truth is and he is telling it.
- Yes – there is evidence that he is lying on purpose or he does not know what the truth is.
- Possibly – there is evidence that he is confused and so he may not know what the truth is. There is not enough evidence to say what the truth is.

Look at **P40 & P41** again

How does the dream differ this time? Does it help the group to understand any more about what may have happened?

## CHAPTER 6

Read to the **End of P49**. The porter asks Jon/Joe 'why did you do it?'

What could he mean?

Now read **P50 & P51**

Does the porter's question help the group to work out what is happening in the dream?

## CHAPTER 7

Read to the **End of P56**

Does the group think that the nurses and doctors do have the brothers Jon and Joseph mixed up? What might have happened to the other brother?

Read to **End of P57**

What does Nurse Hill mean when she talks about Jon/Joe's 'act'? Does the group think he is 'acting'?

Read to the **End of the Chapter**

Now Jon/Joe has seen something very important in his dream. What is it?

## CHAPTER 8

Read to the end of **P69**

What does the group think Doctor Black tells Joe he has done?

Find a simile on **P68**.

Read **P70**

What has happened here? What has Joe done that he should not have been able to do?

Now does the group think Joe is an unreliable narrator?

- No – there is evidence now that he knows what the truth is and he is telling it.
- Yes – there is evidence now that he has been lying on purpose or he does not know what the truth is.
- Possibly – there is evidence that he is confused and so he may not know what the truth is. There is not enough evidence to say what the truth is.

Read to the **End of the Chapter**

Now the dream is complete and Joe knows what happened. Because Joe is an unreliable narrator, we still do not know the entire story.

Working as a group, answer these sets of questions:

### Set 1: Facts we now know

- A. Is the narrator Jon, or Joe?
- B. What has Joe done?
- C. Did the doctors and nurses ever take Joe's arms and legs?

### Set 2: Facts we can work out

- A. What sort of hospital is Joe in?



**Set 3: Facts we try to work out with information from the book but may not be able to say for sure**

- A. Did Joe really believe the doctors had taken his arms and legs, or was he putting on an act?
- B. Did Joe really not remember what he had done?
- C. Did Joe really think he was Jon?

**Set 4: Facts we have to guess for ourselves**

- A. Why did Joe kill his brother? (*Prompts: perhaps he was suffering from mental illness; perhaps he hated his brother.*)
- B. What might be wrong with Joe? (*Prompts: mental illness; perhaps he is punishing himself because he feels a lot of guilt.*)

## CHAPTER 9

Read the **Whole Chapter**

What has happened?

Why has Joe gone back to believing he is Jon? Why does he not remember what Dr Black told him? (*Prompts: mental illness; perhaps he is punishing himself again because he feels a lot of guilt; perhaps he has amnesia brought on by the murder.*)

## SUMMING UP

What does the group think of the fact that Joe is an unreliable narrator and there are still questions not answered at the end of the book?

- Does this make the book more like real life, or less?
- Does this make the book more interesting, or less?
- Does this mean that the reader has to work harder, or not?

## PART 3 EXTENSION ACTIVITY: ART & ILLNESS

Pictures are an important part of **Jon for Short**. **Jon for Short** is a story about illness. It seems very likely that Joe/Jon is mentally ill. This is perhaps because of his guilt over killing his brother.

There is a long history of art being used to help people who are ill to recover. Sometimes the ill person makes the art.

In 1988 the Scottish artist John Bellany became very ill and needed a major operation. Almost as soon as he came round after the operation, he began to draw and then to paint. He made many drawings and paintings before he left the hospital. These pictures are called the 'Addenbrookes Series'. Addenbrookes is the name of the hospital where John Bellany had his operation.

Look at these 'Addenbrookes' pictures:

1. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bellany-self-portrait-addenbrookes-i-p78022>
2. [http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/B/4527/artist\\_name/John%20Bellany/record\\_id/2194](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/B/4527/artist_name/John%20Bellany/record_id/2194)
3. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bellany-self-portrait-t05734>
4. [http://www.magnoliabox.com/art/482752/Self-Portrait\\_from\\_The\\_Addenbrookes\\_Hospital\\_Series](http://www.magnoliabox.com/art/482752/Self-Portrait_from_The_Addenbrookes_Hospital_Series)

In which of the pictures does John Bellany look most ill?

In which does he look most healthy?

Sometimes, when a person is very ill, they may feel that they will never recover. Can you find any evidence in any of these paintings that John Bellany ever felt like that? Which one(s)?

Does anything about John Bellany's 'Addenbrookes' pictures remind you of the pictures in Jon for Short? Look at the following statements. Which are true for both sets of pictures?

### A. The style is quite scratchy and makes us think of a weak, ill or disturbed person:

Jon for Short	TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	NOT TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	SOMETIMES TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>
'Addenbrookes'	TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	NOT TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	SOMETIMES TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>

### B. The pictures are quite scary and show us that hospitals can be scary places sometimes:

Jon for Short	TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	NOT TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	SOMETIMES TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>
'Addenbrookes'	TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	NOT TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	SOMETIMES TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>

**C. The pictures don't just show the ill person as he really looks. Sometimes they show what is going on in his head as well.**

Jon for Short	TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	NOT TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	SOMETIMES TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>
'Addenbrookes'	TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	NOT TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>	SOMETIMES TRUE <input type="checkbox"/>

Review the group's answers. Does the group think the artist who did the pictures in Jon for Short perhaps wanted to get across the idea that Jon had done the pictures himself?

- YES
- NO
- MAYBE

(n.b. *There is no 'right answer' to this question!*)

The artist and writer Quentin Blake is best known for his own children's books, and the books by Roald Dahl for which he did the pictures. Quentin Blake is also Patron of the Nightingale Project. The Nightingale Project helps make sure that people dealing with mental illness have access to art and music to help them recover. One of the things the Project does is to help get pictures on the walls in hospitals.

Quentin Blake has painted many pictures for hospitals. Follow this link to download a pdf that shows some of these.

[http://www.comptonverney.org.uk/\\_userfiles/pages/file/Press/Quentin%20Blake%20press%20pack.pdf](http://www.comptonverney.org.uk/_userfiles/pages/file/Press/Quentin%20Blake%20press%20pack.pdf)

In the pdf you will see a set of pictures for an eating disorder clinic, a set for a maternity hospital (where babies are born) and a set from a medical centre where children are treated. (You may wish to focus on the first and last of these).

As a group, discuss how you think each set of pictures might help the people in the place for which it was painted. (*Prompts: the eating disorder clinic pictures focus on positive images of food as a normal part of life, and of taking care of one's appearance; the maternity hospital pictures of mothers and babies in water suggest feelings of happiness, calm, freedom and support; the aliens in the medical centre series take care of children and are taken care of by children, introducing the idea of friendly care-givers – Quentin Blake has explained that he thinks going to hospital can be like 'going to an alien planet.'*)

## PART 4 ABOUT MALORIE BLACKMAN



Malorie Blackman became a full-time writer in 1990. Since then she has won the Young Telegraph Award (twice) and the WH Smith Book Award and been shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. Her best-known books are for young adults – *Noughts and Crosses* (2001), *Knife Edge* (2004), *Checkmate* (2005), and *Double Cross* (2008). These form the *Noughts and Crosses* series following the tale of two teenagers, Callum and Sephy, living in a divided world. Malorie was awarded an OBE in 2008. She lives in Kent.

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