

# **Birdsong Study Guide**

## **Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks**

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# Plot Summary

*Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks is a novel about World War I and its effects on the novel's protagonist, Stephen Wraysford, as well as his granddaughter, Elizabeth Benson. Before the war, Stephen has an affair with a married woman which produces a child of which he is unaware. Stephen fights the Germans during the war and is deeply affected by the violence he witnesses. Sixty years later, Elizabeth becomes interested in learning about her grandparents and studies the war to gain a better understanding of her grandfather, Stephen. *Birdsong* is an interesting and entertaining novel about how war affects those who serve in battle and how the history of war is important for those in the future seeking to understand the past.

In France 1910, Stephen is sent to the Azaires in Amiens to learn about the textile factory, but his attraction to Isabelle, Mr. Azaire's wife, leads to them having an affair. Isabelle runs away with Stephen, and they live happily in a small house in St.-Remy-de-Provence. When Isabelle realizes she is pregnant, she fears for her child's future and leaves Stephen to return to her family's home, but she never tells Stephen about the child she carries.

In France 1916, Stephen is a lieutenant in France during World War I. He feels disdain for his men and even for his best friend, Captain Michael Weir. Stephen refuses all offers of leave, even after he is wounded and nearly dies. A miner in the tunnels on the Front, Jack Firebrace, learns his son has died from a fever and mourns for his dead son. When the platoon is ordered to attack at Hawthorne Ridge, many of them write to their nearest relatives since the attack seems doomed to fail, and Stephen writes to Isabelle because he has no one else to write. Most of Stephen's platoon is killed during the attack.

In England 1978, Elizabeth, Stephen's granddaughter, becomes interested in learning about her grandfather's life and the war. In Albert, she is struck by the magnitude of the war memorial. When she finds Stephen's journals in her mother's attic, she tries to decipher them since they are written in code.

In France 1917, Stephen runs into Jeanne while on leave in Amiens, and she agrees to take him to see Isabelle whose face was disfigured by a shell during a bombardment. Although Isabelle tells him about her relationship with Max, a German soldier, she does not mention their child for fear it would complicate matters between them. Stephen is relieved to return to the Front, and he begins corresponding with Jeanne. Shortly after Stephen is assigned to a staff job, he learns that Weir has been killed by a German sniper, and he mourns for his friend.

In England 1978-79, Elizabeth continues researching the war, and she talks to veterans about their experiences in her attempt to learn more about her grandfather. She learns that she is pregnant with Robert, her married boyfriend's child.



In France 1918, Stephen and Jack Firebrace are trapped in a tunnel when the enemy sets off an explosion. Jack tells Stephen about his dead son, John, and Stephen promises to name his son John, if he ever has one. Although Jack dies in the tunnel, German Lieutenant Levi rescues Stephen who returns to the English Front.

In England 1979, Elizabeth feels that she knows much more about the war and her grandfather after reading all of his notebooks. When she finally tells her mother about her pregnancy, Françoise is oddly supportive and explains that she was raised by Stephen and Jeanne after Isabelle's death. Elizabeth gives birth to her son whom she names John in honor of her grandfather's promise to Jack Firebrace.



# Section 1: France 1910, Part 1, pages 3-31

## Section 1: France 1910, Part 1, pages 3-31 Summary

On a late spring evening, the Azaires' house shows a strong, formal front on boulevard du Cange, and Stephen Wraysford readies himself for dinner where Mr. Azaire introduces him to Mme. Azaire and the children, Lisette and Gregoire. As they eat, Azaire asks Stephen what he knows about textiles, and Stephen explains that he deals mostly with financial matters and his boss wants him to understand more of the manufacturing process. Stephen listens as the family members talk about their day, and though he avoids catching Mme. Azaire's eye, he notices her beauty in his peripheral. After dinner, the Berards visit, and as Mr. Berard sings a sentimental ballad about the different times of a man's life, his eyes remain fixed on Mme. Azaire. Blushing, Mme. Azaire excuses herself, pleading a headache. Azaire, the Berards and Stephen play cards until the Berards leave when Stephen retires to his room to write in the notebook he has kept for five years. When he hears a woman's voice, he sneaks through the house, toward the sound, until he reaches a closed door where he listens to Mme. Azaire plead with her husband followed by a thud and a sound of pain. Stephen inches toward the door but checks his anger in time to retreat when he hears footsteps near the door. He rushes back to his room, and when he reads his earlier entry in his notebook, he is surprised "that what had struck him most he had not written about at all" (page 14). In the morning, Stephen puts the happenings of the previous night from his mind and submits to a tour of Azaire's business operations. Azaire retrieves Meyreaux for a meeting while Stephen watches the workers on the factory floor. Azaire explains to Meyreaux that Stephen's employer wants to see more cooperation between the two countries, France and England, in an attempt to soothe Meyreaux's suspicions that their employees will lose their jobs. While they discuss the dyers' strike, Stephen watches them, thinking of Azaire's wealth, his children and his wife, "a figure he viewed with an incompatible mixture of feelings" (page 17). Though Mme. Azaire is proper and modest, she seems animated by a different rhythm than her husband.

A week later, Meyreaux brings Stephen to lunch with the men in the factory at Azaire's suggestion, but on the third day, Stephen excuses himself and abruptly rushes from the room. When Azaire asks about Stephen's health the next day at dinner, Stephen suggests the chemicals in the factory make it hard for him to breath and that is the reason he felt faint. Mme. Azaire chides her husband for pursuing the matter, and when Azaire mocks her mysterious nature, Stephen grits his teeth to prevent himself from defending Mme. Azaire. The Berards visit after dinner, and Stephen watches the role they play in the Azaires' life; this way of passing the evenings frustrates Stephen, and he wonders how Mme. Azaire stands it. Berard invites the Azaires to an afternoon in the water gardens next Sunday. One day, Stephen finds Mme. Azaire in her garden when he returns from work, and since he offers to help her prune the rose bushes, she shows him how. After learning that Lisette and Gregoire are Mme. Azaire's stepchildren,



Stephen grabs her hand without thinking. Blushing, she asks him to release her hand, and when he mentions the sounds he heard from her room the other night, she insists he must not humiliate her and must respect her position. As Stephen leaves, Mme. Azaire watches him before turning back to her roses, "shaking her head as though in defiance of some unwanted feeling" (page 125). After fleeing from the workers' lunch room, Stephen eats at a cafe on the other side of the cathedral which is frequented by young men. Halfway through lunch, he sees Mme. Azaire bustle past the window, her face concealed with a scarf. He scurries after her to offer to carry her parcel, but she refuses since they have already reached her destination. A young man opens the door, and Mme. Azaire introduces him as Lucien Lebrun, the man rumored to be behind the dyers' strike. Mme. Azaire explains that she secretly brings food for Lucien to distribute among the dyers' families. Worried about the ease between Lebrun and Mme. Azaire, Stephen excuses himself to return to the factory. Mme. Azaire insists he must not think badly of her because she is loyal to her husband. Stephen kisses her cheek and leaves before he can see her responding blush.

## Section 1: France 1910, Part 1, pages 3-31 Analysis

The first section is set in France in 1910, and it introduces the protagonist, Stephen Wraysford. Additionally, the Azaire family is introduced. This first part instigates the action of the rest of the novel, though the style and genre of the narrative in Part 1 are very different from the remainder of the novel. The reader learns Stephen is an Englishman visiting France to learn about the textile industry as he discusses business matters with Rene Azaire. On his first night at the Azaires' house, Stephen notices Mme. Azaire's beauty, foreshadowing his romantic interest in her. That night, Stephen overhears Rene and Isabelle Azaire fighting, and his offense at noises that indicates a physical scuffle between the two also foreshadows his relationship with Isabelle. Before retiring to bed, Stephen writes in his notebook, and the narrator indicates that he does so every night; these notebooks play a role in later parts of the novel and should be noted as important. The next day, the conversation at the factory alerts the reader to the discord among Azaire's workers because his dyers are currently on strike. Meyreaux is obviously sympathetic to the strikers, a fact that seems to anger Azaire who believes that he, as the owner of the factory, is always right. Azaire introduces Stephen to Meyreaux, and Meyreaux's distrust of the Englishman is apparent. While watching the two men discuss their business, Stephen's mind wanders to Isabelle, foreshadowing their relationship. He notes the differences between Azaire and his wife, thinking the match is incongruent to each of their personalities.

It is unclear why Stephen rushes from the factory lunchroom a week later, but when Isabelle chides her husband for pursuing the conversation about Stephen's health, Rene mocks her mysterious nature, causing Stephen much difficulty in refraining from defending Isabelle. This, also, foreshadows the relationship between Stephen and Isabelle. When Stephen approaches Isabelle in the garden one day, she rebuffs his attempts at flirtation, but as he leaves, she shakes "her head as though in defiance of some unwanted feeling" (page 125). This indicates that Isabelle reciprocates Stephen's interest, though she is not willing to succumb to it. While eating lunch in a cafe near the



factory one day, Stephen sees Isabelle on the street, and quickly following her, he catches her at Lucien Lebrun's house. Though Stephen suspects a romantic entanglement between the two, Isabelle declares her innocence and explains that she brings food to Lebrun to distribute among the impoverished dyer workers' families. This reveals Isabelle's sympathetic nature and serves as a contrast to Rene who is indifferent to such needs as it affects his business. Stephen kisses Isabelle on the cheek, again attempting to advance their relationship and foreshadowing the eventual path that their relationship takes.



## Section 2: France 1910, Part 1, pages 32-58

### Section 2: France 1910, Part 1, pages 32-58 Summary

Isabelle Fourmentier, the youngest of five sisters, was a sweet child who did not question her parents' indifference, and her parents always assumed she would stay to look after them when her older sisters married and left home. At the age of 18, Isabelle met Jean Destournel, a young infantry officer, but after courting her for a year, Jean withdrew his suit because her father did not find him worthy to marry Isabelle. Three years later, Mr. Fourmentier heard of the Azaire family and arranged for Rene Azaire to marry Isabelle who agreed because she was eager to be free of her parents' house and Rene promised to allow her some independence. Rene tries unsuccessfully to impregnate Isabelle, and while he becomes frustrated, she grows less concerned with her husband; however, Isabelle fears Stephen, though he is 9 years younger than she, and tries to make herself look down on him as a child. On Sunday morning, Stephen accompanies the Azaires and the Berards on a boat tour around the water gardens. He is unsuccessful in his attempts to engage Isabelle's eye, and at lunch, he unthinkingly gives Lisette a wood carving when she admires it. Back in the boat, Isabelle's foot rests against Stephen's calf, but she removes it when she emerges from her trance-like state. Back at the house, Stephen thinks of Isabelle as he rests, and he dreams about saving a trapped bird.

The next day, Stephen receives a telegram from London, summoning him home as soon as he concludes his business, and he responds that he needs another month. At work the next day, he learns the dyers' strike may spread to the other textile workers, and as Meyreaux tries to dissuade the men from joining the strike, Lucien Lebrun enters and asks the men to join the strike. A fight ensues, during which Stephen strikes a man for insinuating that Isabelle is very good friends with Lebrun. Stephen returns to the Azaires' house to tend his injured hand, and he writes his guardian, Mr. Vaughan, that he is in love and believes the woman shares his feelings, but he throws the letter in the trash. At dinner, Stephen tries to hide his injured hand, but when Lisette notices it, Isabelle asks the maid to tend to it after dinner. Staying home the next day, Stephen joins Isabelle and Lisette for dinner when he tells them he will be leaving soon. After Lisette excuses herself for a nap, Stephen pulls Isabelle to him and kisses her. She objects, but he insists he loves her. Frightened but choked by passion, Isabelle runs from the room but returns to tell Stephen to come to the red room. In the red room, Isabelle says please, and Stephen undresses her. After making love, they lay in silence for a long time. Stephen insists that what they have done is right, and when he says he is sure he will give himself away if he looks at her in the house, Isabelle assures him "you will be strong because you love me" (page 58).





## Section 2: France 1910, Part 1, pages 32-58 Analysis

As the first part of *Birdsong* continues, the narrator provides a history about Isabelle Azaire, explaining her early disappointment in love, her indifferent parents, and the fact that her marriage to Azaire resulted from an arrangement between Azaire and her father after Azaire's first wife died. Additionally, this background information describes the strained relation between Isabelle and her husband which results from his inability to impregnate her. As a result, Isabelle becomes less concerned with her husband; however, her fear of Stephen suggests her attraction to him. During their afternoon in the water gardens, Stephen continually thinks about Isabelle, and this, along with her foot resting against his leg in the boat, continues the foreshadowing regarding their relationship. Before the trip, Lisette flirtatiously claims the trip will be much more enjoyable because Stephen is going, indicating her interest in Stephen and foreshadowing complications in Stephen's relationship with Isabelle as a result of Lisette's interest in him. Also on the boat tour, Stephen gives a wood carving he made to Lisette, unintentionally encouraging her interest. After the trip, Stephen's dream about rescuing a trapped bird is a transparent metaphor for saving Isabelle from her unhappy marriage. Stephen is upset at the ideal of leaving the Azaires when his employer summons him back to London, and he begs for another week. During the fight about the strike at the factory, Stephen displays his love for Isabelle by hitting a man who made insulting, insinuating remarks about Rene's wife and her relationship with Lebrun. Staying home the next day because of his injured hand, Stephen's solicitations finally elicit a response from Isabelle, and they consummate their relationship, fulfilling the earlier foreshadowing surrounding their relationship. Isabelle does not feel guilty, but she thinks she should; Stephen assures her that what they have done is not wrong. He worries about revealing their secret if he looks at her in front of people, but Isabelle believes that he will be strong because she has faith in his love for her.



## Section 3: France 1910, Part 1, pages 59-84

### Section 3: France 1910, Part 1, pages 59-84 Summary

Azaire is in a good mood after work because Meyreaux is near coming to terms with the workers, and when asked, Isabelle tells him she ran her usual errands in town during the day. Her eyes flicker at the sound of Stephen's approach, and she fears seeing hostility in his eyes; however, he does not look at her during dinner. As Azaire and Stephen discuss going fishing, Isabelle feels a pang of loss as she recalls that Azaire is her choice and she has no way of talking to Stephen. The Berards visit, and as Isabelle tells them about a book she supposedly read all afternoon, Stephen is shocked by her fluency in lying. Isabelle wishes Stephen would catch her eye as the conversation changes, but feeling guilty when he looks at her body, she excuses herself and goes to bed. Stephen follows shortly afterward to see how she is doing before kissing her and returning to the card game. Stephen returns to the factory the next day because it is difficult to be in the house without being able to be alone with Isabelle. Returning to the Azaires' house too late for lunch, he finds Isabelle in the study, kisses her and agrees to meet in the red room. In the red room, Isabelle admits she was scared Stephen had changed his feelings, but he reassures her before they make love and take a nap. Waking, Stephen asks Isabelle about the fight he heard between Isabelle and Azaire, and she explains that Rene's guilt in being unable to impregnate her led to an inability to perform sexually; now, Azaire hits Isabelle to excite himself, but she cannot stop sleeping with him or he will tell everyone she is a bad wife. Though Isabelle thinks she should feel guilty because she has never been unfaithful before, she does not and has gone too far to turn back now. Stephen holds Isabelle, and they sleep peacefully.

Azaire does not suspect what is happening in his house. His feelings toward Isabelle are dominated by anger and frustration, and though he does not love her, he wants her to be more responsive toward him. A week after the disturbance with Lebrun, Azaire asks Stephen to return to the factory. Stephen's employer responds that he may stay until the end of the month, but Stephen does not tell Isabelle the date of his departure. During the weekend, Stephen joins the Azaires' fishing expedition to the Ancre. The morning passes without catching any fish, and at lunch in town, Stephen, looking at Isabelle, realizes he cannot return to England because he has been mastered by his feelings for her. Back at the river, Lisette sneaks up behind Stephen, and when he is surprised to see her, she confesses she knows everything about Stephen and Isabelle because she heard them the first afternoon. She is upset that Stephen led her on; she is 17 years old, a woman, and wants him to do those things to her. Though Stephen refuses, Lisette rubs his hands against her breasts and genitals. He pulls away, insisting she must not start such things or mention what she said earlier to anyone. Lisette promises; she just wants to go home now.



## Section 3: France 1910, Part 1, pages 59-84 Analysis

When Azaire returns home and questions Isabelle about her day, she lies to her husband to conceal her affair with Stephen. During dinner, she worries that Stephen has changed his mind and will reject her now that she has physically given herself to him. Stephen avoids her eyes during dinner, and this reinforces her fear, though she insisted he be strong for her sake. Isabelle is proud when Stephen shares a story from his childhood, but she feels she has lost something valuable when she recalls that she belongs to Rene and cannot be with Stephen. When Stephen looks at Isabelle's body, she feels guilty and excuses herself. Luckily, Stephen follows her to her bedroom, reassuring her of his love. Stephen returns to the house after lunch the next day, and after resuming their physical relationship, Isabelle admits she feared he had changed his mind and receives assurances of his devotion. At Stephen's prompting, Isabelle admits that Rene physically abuses her to gain arousal, and Stephen promises to protect her. Isabelle still does not feel guilty, though she has never been unfaithful before, but she feels she should; however, she has gone too far to turn back now. The narrator explains Rene's feelings of anger and frustration toward his wife, as well as Rene's desire that she be more responsive to him. Stephen does not tell Isabelle the date of his departure when his employer writes that he must return to London at the end of the month. When Stephen joins the Azaires on their fishing trip to the Ancre, he realizes the extent of his feelings for Isabelle and knows he cannot leave her. The earlier foreshadowing regarding Lisette's interest in Stephen culminates on this trip when she makes advances to him. She also admits that she knows about his affair with her step-mother, and she accuses him of leading her on. Lisette is obviously uncomfortable with the things she forces Stephen to do, and she agrees not to start such things again and that she will not tell anyone about Stephen's affair with Isabelle.



## Section 4: France 1910, Part 1, pages 85-113

### Section 4: France 1910, Part 1, pages 85-113 Summary

For another week, Isabelle and Stephen continue their strange existence in the house on boulevard du Cange. One day, Stephen contrives to return early from the factory and finds Isabelle waiting in the red room. This is his first chance alone with her since the fishing trip, and he tells her about his conversation with Lisette. Isabelle feels it is her duty to stay and look after Lisette instead of going to England with Stephen, but he insists she will "leave the husband who beats you and go with the man who loves you" (page 87). When Azaire returns home, he announces the strike is finished and asks when Stephen is leaving, and it is obvious that Azaire is content and relieved for Stephen to leave at the end of the week so his life can return to normal. Isabelle sees only loneliness if she stays with Azaire, and though she cannot imagine life with Stephen, she trusts him to make the decision. Azaire mentions hearing that a woman was helping the dyers, and when Isabelle admits she is the woman, Azaire says he also heard she was having a liaison with Lebrun. Isabelle denies the accusation, stating she has been sleeping with Stephen. When Azaire rages, Stephen says Isabelle is leaving with him. Isabelle goes upstairs to pack, and Stephen follows her, holding her tight for a moment before returning to his room to pack his belongings. Stephen and Isabelle leave Azaire's house and take the train to Plombieres where Stephen tells Isabelle about his childhood. A week later, they travel south to celebrate Stephen's twenty-first birthday in Grenoble, and Jeanne, Isabelle's sister, wires money to them. In October, they arrive in St.-Remy-de-Provence where Stephen gets a job as the assistant to a furniture maker while Isabelle tends the house. They are happy, but "it was an existence [Stephen] felt had been won by him but in some wider judgment would not be allowed" (page 104).

Though two months pass, Isabelle's period does not arrive, yet she says nothing to Stephen because she does not want to be treated with special regard; however, she already loves the child growing inside her. A week later, Isabelle feels a sharp pain and cannot stop bleeding. After visiting the doctor, she stops at a church to admit her feelings of guilt to herself for having an affair with Stephen. Isabelle writes Jeanne a week later that she thought she had lost her child, but it is safe. She has not told Stephen yet because she is frightened; she fears Stephen and she went too far and she will not be the ideal mother. Isabelle worries that her child's well-being cannot be guaranteed when she is far from her home with Stephen. Meanwhile, Stephen's life concern is Isabelle's well-being. Isabelle privately plans to visit Jeanne and decide whether to return once she is away from Stephen. She becomes physically and emotionally distant until one day while Stephen is at work, Isabelle packs her suitcase and leaves without a note. When Stephen returns, he immediately notices that Isabelle's personal items are gone. He continues to live as though nothing has changed; knowing she left because she thought she could save her soul, "he had no choice but to continue



with what he had begun... he could think of nothing... he felt himself grow cold" (page 113).

## Section 4: France 1910, Part 1, pages 85-113 Analysis

Stephen and Isabelle do not manage to be alone together for a week after the fishing trip, and when they are finally alone, Stephen tells Isabelle about Lisette's advances. Isabelle guiltily feels she should stay with Azaire to look after Lisette rather than leave with Stephen, but Stephen insists she is going to run away with him. When Azaire returns home, he is happy because the strike is over, and his contentment at the idea of Stephen leaving soon and his life returning to normal causes Isabelle to see her future loneliness if she stays with Rene. She cannot imagine life with Stephen, but she trusts him to make a decision. Rene mentions a rumor that the wife of a factory owner was helping the dyers, and Isabelle admits that she helped the dyers. Rene angrily states that he also heard that she was having an affair with Lebrun, but Isabelle denies this accusation, confessing that she has been sleeping with Stephen instead. As Rene gives way to his anger, Stephen announces that Isabelle is leaving Rene and running away with Stephen. As Isabelle packs, Stephen stops by her room to give her a comforting hug before returning to his room to pack his own belongings. Rene's anger continues to rage as Stephen and Isabelle flee from his house. As they travel, Stephen tells Isabelle about his childhood, they celebrate his twenty-first birthday, and Jeanne sends them money. They settle down in St.-Remy-de-Provence, but though they are very happy together, Stephen worries that it will not be permitted by "some wider judgment" (page 104). Isabelle learns that she is pregnant, but she keeps the baby a secret from Stephen. She is frightened when she thinks she may have lost the baby, and this causes her to question whether the child will be safe and protected with her and Stephen. Isabelle packs and leaves; though she writes a note, she throws it away because there are not sufficient words to express her feelings or her reasons for leaving. Stephen is distraught when he realizes Isabelle has abandoned him, but he continues to live as though nothing has changed because he knows there is nothing he can do to convince her to return to him.



## **Section 5: France 1916, Part 2, pages 117-133**

### **Section 5: France 1916, Part 2, pages 117-133 Summary**

As Jack Firebrace digs the tunnel underground, Evans summons him because Turner heard something that sounded like digging twenty yards back. Captain Weir sends a message to the surface to turn off the air-feed so Jack can listen, but they return to work when he determines it is only shellfire. When an explosion throws earth and rock into four men, killing them, Weir orders the men to get out now. On the surface, Jack receives a letter from his wife, Margaret, in Edmonton, telling him that John, his 8 year old son, is in the hospital with a fever. Jack tries to recall his son, but he is usually too busy on the front to "allow his mind to dwell on inessentials" (page 123). When Jack falls asleep on sentry duty, Weir orders him to appear at 6 a.m. for the offense; Jack is afraid because sleeping on duty could be a court martial offense for which he will be shot. In the morning, Weir introduces Jack to Lieutenant Wraysford who will not charge Jack because he is not under his command. After Jack is denied visiting his sick son because they are undermanned, Stephen points out that every man they have killed was someone's son.

When the miners are finally relieved, they go to a nearby village for a rest where an infantry battalion is also resting. The men eat, bathe and look for ways to spend their five francs. Most of them drink. It is difficult when the time comes to leave the village because Jack never grows accustomed to this parting. For three days, Stephen's section of the line is shelled off and on, and they assume a large attack is imminent. Stephen, promoted through the ranks because he is better educated than most of the others, talks to members of his platoon. He worries about the effects on his platoon by the third day. Near midnight, Weir visits Stephen's dugout which shakes with reverberations of a huge shell. When Weir begs Stephen to talk about something other than war, Stephen complies by talking about the one woman he loved, but he tries not to think about her while he is on the front. Weir joined the army to get away from his parents. Stephen says his men do not respect him because he despises them. Hunt summons Stephen because a shell in their section has caused many casualties, and Stephen tends to the wounded; he wants the blood off of him.

### **Section 5: France 1916, Part 2, pages 117-133 Analysis**

Although Part 2 of *Birdsong* is set in France, it occurs six years after Part 1, during World War I. The second part of the novel introduces Captain Michael Weir and Jack Firebrace who both play a large role in Stephen's life. Jack's letter from his wife informs him that his son is sick, foreshadowing John's death. The explosion that kills four men in the tunnel foreshadows and parallels future events in the story. When he falls asleep on



sentry duty, Jack is taken to Stephen to receive punishment, and Jack worries because he knows the offense may warrant his death; however, Stephen refuses to mete out a punishment. The miners rest for a few days when they are relieved from their duties by another group of miners, and this portion of the novel shows the desolation that results from war. Stephen's rank as a lieutenant results from his superior education, rather than his military skills. His platoon receives heavy fire for several days, and their assumption that a large attack is imminent foreshadows their attack against the Germans in the future. Weir's visit to Stephen and their conversation about love demonstrates their close friendship. The fact that Weir is still a virgin foreshadows Stephen's acts to sully his friend's innocence.



## **Section 6: France 1916, Part 2, pages 152-185**

### **Section 6: France 1916, Part 2, pages 152-185 Summary**

Stephen's company rests three days in Bethune when they are relieved at the front. Stephen recalls the time he spent with Isabelle. He stayed in St.-Remy for a year after she left, and after a year of anguish, he went cold without healing. Stephen was relieved when the war came, and though he first thought it could be won quickly, he watched half of his platoon die under enemy fire. He tuned himself to killing and tried to be fearless in hopes of comforting the other men. When Stephen goes downstairs, Captain Gray tells him the men will fight better if he makes them love him, but Stephen admits he does not love his men because he does not value his own life. Since he is denied his application to visit his son, Jack returns underground when Weir orders a second tunnel to be built at his superiors' orders. Jack tries to ignore the pressure of the small space, playing Fritz with Evans, a game to predict where the enemy is. When Stephen asks for volunteers to go into the fighting tunnel, he chooses Hunt and Byrne since no one offers, and Jack escorts the men because he lost at Fritz. Hunt and Byrne are nervous so Stephen tries to encourage them with reminders of how much they hate the Germans. Soon after Byrne finds a spot where the enemy dug into their tunnel, they hear an explosion behind them, and fire ensues as they try to stop the enemy from reaching their men. Stephen is wounded by an enemy grenade, and in the medical ward, a voice appeals to his shame and unfulfilled curiosity as he passes into oblivion.

After the bombardment ends, Jack asks about Stephen and learns he was put over the wall, meaning he is dead. When Jack goes to pray for Stephen, Stephen lurches into his arms and asks him to help. At his usual billet in the village, Weir tries not to worry about Stephen, but he fears his friend is dead since he has heard no word. He cries, deciding to court death if Stephen is gone. Stephen begins to heal, and eventually, he is allowed outside during the afternoons. Captain Gray visits Stephen because he will receive two weeks leave and is then being promoted to go on course at Amiens. Stephen objects because, after a year of preparation, he does not want to leave at the vital moment. Gray insists the orders come from his commanding officer, Colonel Barclay, but Stephen begs Gray to convince Barclay to let him stay. Gray agrees it may be possible but advises Stephen to make himself indispensable. He also tells Stephen they are planning to attack at the River Ancre soon. They shake hands, and Stephen returns to the hospital.

### **Section 6: France 1916, Part 2, pages 152-185 Analysis**

Stephen's platoon is also relieved at the Front, and they rest in Bethune for three days. Alone for the first time in a long while, Stephen reflects on the time he spent with





Isabelle, allowing the narrator to inform the reader that he stayed in St.-Remy-de-Provence for a year after Isabelle abandoned him and that he never healed from the pain of losing her. Though he was relieved at first when war broke out, Stephen watched half of his platoon die and now tries to be fearless in order to comfort his men. When he goes to breakfast, Captain Gray, his superior, offers advice about leading a platoon which Stephen seems to ignore. Jack Firebrace is not permitted to leave to visit his son, so he returns underground, and he is forced to lead Stephen, Hunt and Byrne into the tunnels because he loses a game with another miner. The enemy attacks in the tunnel, and Stephen is wounded. Unfortunately, Stephen is mistaken for dead and thrown over the wall, but luckily, Jack finds him and takes him to the hospital. Stephen sees more of the horrors of war while he is in the hospital, and when he recovers, Gray visits to tell him he is being sent away to an office job. Stephen objects because he does not want to leave his men, especially when Gray informs him they are planning to attack the Germans; it seems that Stephen is courting death. Gray agrees to try to persuade Colonel Barclay to allow Stephen to remain on the Front, but he insists Stephen will follow his orders if he does.



## Section 7: France 1916, Part 2, pages 186-230

### Section 7: France 1916, Part 2, pages 186-230 Summary

When Stephen tells Weir he is taking him to the village on Thursday night for a farewell treat, Weir is filled with anxiety because he suspects Stephen is taking him to a prostitute since he is a virgin. On night patrol, Stephen's body tenses with hatred as he listens to sounds of German housekeeping. Returning to their side of the line, he treats Byrne to a drink as Jack sits nearby, praying for his son, John. The next day, Jack receives a letter from Margaret but decides to wait to open it until he returns from underground for the day because it is better to die ignorant if the news is bad. At 8 p.m., Stephen collects Weir and takes him to a farmhouse outside of the village where he buys him a prostitute. When the prostitute insists on seeing Stephen also, he is filled with hatred as he mentally compares her to Isabelle. He cuts her leg with his knife, but when he apologizes, she comforts him; she understands; war is difficult.

Weir has orders to move to Albert the next day, and no one notices his absence in the turmoil of moving preparations. Rumors abound that they are going to attack, but Weir is resigned to the loss of tranquility since he feels he has lost control of his own life. After his night shift, Jack reads Margaret's letter and learns his son has died, but he determines not to let it shake his faith. They arrive in Albert the first week of June, and Gray takes Stephen to see Colonel Barclay, introducing Stephen as the man who has some knowledge of the terrain. Barclay tells them they plan to attack on Hawthorn Ridge, and he mocks Stephen and Gray for their hesitations. Stephen is eager to return to the Front and his version of reality. The battalion marches to the village of Colincamps for two days before moving to the front line where they fall in under the eye of CSM Price. Barclay rides along the lines, telling the men they will attack tomorrow, and Stephen notes the fear on his men's faces. The attack is delayed for two days due to rain, and Gray tells Stephen to take charge of the company if Gray dies. As the men write their nearest relations in preparation for death, Stephen writes to Isabelle because he has no one else to write. Early the next morning, Stephen joins his men as they attack the Germans while Jack, with the tunnelers, watches from raised ground. Byrne approaches Stephen to tell him Gray is dead and they are to regroup. That night, Price reads roll call; of 800 men in the battalion, only 155 answer their names. Weir visits Stephen to check his leg which was wounded in the battle. Weir notes it is terrible. Wounded men rise from the hills in attempts to return to their lines. As Weir tearfully wonders what they have done, Stephen holds him and tries to comfort him.



## Section 7: France 1916, Part 2, pages 186-230 Analysis

When Stephen tells Weir he has a farewell present before they head toward the Ancre, Weir worries that Stephen is buying him a prostitute. On patrol, Stephen's hatred for the Germans is apparent. Jack defers reading his letter from Margaret until after work because he would prefer to die ignorant if the news is bad, and this aids the foreshadowing element surrounding the death of his son, John. Stephen takes Weir to a prostitute, and Weir is visibly shaken from the experience. The effect the war has had on Stephen is also visible when he cuts the prostitute's leg with his knife, but she comforts him because she understands how difficult the war is on the men fighting. Rumors that they are going to attack foreshadow their attack on the Ancre. The previous foreshadowing is fulfilled when Jack reads Margaret's letter and learns their son is dead. After they arrive in Albert, Gray takes Stephen to see Barclay, and Barclay agrees to allow Stephen to stay on the Front. As the men prepare for their attack, it seems inevitable that they will fail, and many of them, including Stephen, write to the person dearest to them in preparation of their pending deaths. Few men survive the attack, and Stephen receives a flesh wound on his leg. Weir visits Stephen, lamenting the war and questioning what they have done. Stephen tries to comfort him as they listen to the moans of the wounded attempting to return to their lines.



## Section 8: England 1978, Part 3, pages 233-265

### Section 8: England 1978, Part 3, pages 233-265 Summary

Returning home from a business trip by train, Elizabeth reaches her Victorian house and opens a letter from Robert. Her mother calls to invite her to tea in Twickenham the next day, and Elizabeth's call to Robert goes unanswered. On Saturday, she drives to Twickenham to have tea with her mother, Francoise, and she asks if Francoise has any of her father's old papers because she knows very little about her grandparents. Francoise suggests she may have some in the attic. Elizabeth feels a danger in losing touch with the past and determines to learn about her grandfather as a way "of understanding more about herself" (page 240). Elizabeth asks her co-workers, Irene and Erich, if they know anything about World War I, but they do not. Irene suggests that Elizabeth talk to Bob because he knows everything. Elizabeth drives to Dover, buys a map of France and boards a ship. She is excited to see Robert, but she is not sure what she expects to find after 38 years of not thinking about the war. That night, at a hotel in Arras, a small town near cemeteries and battlefields, she is baffled by the number of regiments, battalions and officers in the index of Bob's book, but she determines she will understand the war because it is important since her own grandfather fought in it.

The next day, Elizabeth drives to Albert where she approaches a man sweeping the steps of an arch near a cluster of buildings. When she asks about the names engraved on the arch, the man explains they are the names of men lost in battles in these fields. Elizabeth sits beneath the monument, crying, "My God, nobody told me" (page 252). Elizabeth visits Robert in Brussels and explains she was not prepared for the scale of the memorial. On Sunday, she is sad that she will soon be leaving, and when she asks when Robert is going to marry her, he answers with excuses about his wife and daughter, saying he is no good for Elizabeth. On Thursday evening, she visits her mother and goes through the boxes in the attic, finally finding a metal trunk with a tied parcel of papers, notebooks, ribbons, three medals and a hip flask that seem to date from an earlier time. Elizabeth guiltily reads about Captain Stephen Wraysford, but she is unable to read the notebook because it is written in some type of code. Telling her mother she found some of Stephen's papers, Francoise says there used to be twenty or thirty notebooks, but she could not read them because they were written in code. The next Saturday, Elizabeth takes the train to Bob and Irene's house to show the notebooks to Bob and ask if he can decipher them. Though it will take some time, Bob is willing to try because he loves a challenge. On the way home, she has treacherous thoughts about Robert, and though she feels completely sincere in her desire for him to leave his wife and be with her, she thinks "it was just possible that she had chosen someone unobtainable for that very reason: that he did not threaten her independence" (page 265).



## Section 8: England 1978, Part 3, pages 233-265

### Analysis

With the beginning of Part 3, Elizabeth is introduced, and the setting changes to England in the late 1970s. In this part of the novel, Elizabeth begins to express an interest in learning about the past when she visits her mother for tea. Elizabeth knows very little about her grandparents and feels that reconnecting with the past may help her understand herself a little better. Francoise's suggestion that she may have some of her father's old papers in the attic foreshadows Elizabeth finding Stephen's journal in her mother's attic. Elizabeth focuses her search on World War I because she knows her grandfather served in the war which makes it important to her though she has never thought much about it in the past and does not know what she expects to find now. In Albert, she comes upon a war memorial, and astounded by the large list of men who died in the area, she cries because no one told her the scale of the war. Elizabeth also visits Robert, her married boyfriend, but when she asks him to leave his wife, he insists he is not good for Elizabeth. Elizabeth digs through Francoise's attic and finds a notebook by Captain Stephen Wraysford, her grandfather, but she cannot read it because it is written in code. She takes it to Bob, her friend's husband who specializes in the era of the first World War, who agrees to attempt to decipher the notebook, foreshadowing his success and Elizabeth being able to read her grandfather's thoughts during the war.



## **Section 9: France 1917, Part 4, pages 269-310**

### **Section 9: France 1917, Part 4, pages 269-310 Summary**

As he continues forward, Stephen wonders what force impels him. His men have become formidable, and though he sometimes loves them for their courage, he feels contempt for them, as for himself, at other times. Only he and two men from his original platoon still survive. Reaching the Front, Stephen visits Weir who recounts going home on leave but having nothing to talk about with his parents. When Stephen asks why Weir is so anxious to survive, Weir says his life is all he has and maybe he will do something with it later. Jack writes Margaret, expressing sorrow at John's death. Weir's company digs a shallow tunnel to listen for the enemy's counter tunnels, and when they hear sounds of German activity above them, Weir evacuates the tunnel, leaving two men to ensure the Germans do not undermine the trench. An explosion buries the two men, and Weir and Stephen crawl through the tunnel to ensure the Germans have not dug under their trench.

When Colonel Gray permits Stephen to visit Amiens, he recalls the time he spent with the Azaires. As he drinks in a bar by the window, a woman scurries past, and believing he recognizes her, Stephen follows. Jeanne Fourmentier also knows who he is and agrees to talk to him. Though he wants to know if Isabelle still loves him, he tells Jeanne an abbreviated version of his life at war. She explains she is single and living with friends in Amiens. Isabelle is doing alright, but Stephen caused her great suffering. Stephen assures Jeanne that his loyalty is to Isabelle's happiness. Jeanne admits she is staying in Amiens to look after Isabelle. Isabelle returned to her father's house after leaving Stephen, and Mr. Fourmentier made a deal with Azaire to take her back; however, Azaire was imprisoned in 1914 with the rest of the men in Amiens, and Isabelle was injured in a heavy bombardment last November. Stephen wants to see Isabelle, and though Jeanne thinks it is a bad idea, she agrees to give her sister the choice. Jeanne will meet Stephen at 9 p.m. tomorrow to tell him what Isabelle decides.

### **Section 9: France 1917, Part 4, pages 269-310 Analysis**

Part 4 returns to the war in France in 1917 as Stephen continues to fight in the war without knowing what force urges him on. His feelings for his men are mixed between love and contempt, and he feels the same about himself. Most of his men have died from his original platoon. Weir visits his parents when he goes on leave, but he finds little to say to them. Weir's company continues to dig tunnels, and the explosion that buries two men foreshadows and parallels the earlier explosion and future explosions. When Stephen goes on leave to Amiens, he reminisces about his time with the Azaires, specifically Isabelle. Ironically, he encounters Jeanne, Isabelle's sister, and he pleads



with her to arrange a meeting with Isabelle. Jeanne informs him that his previous actions caused her sister much suffering and that her sister was injured by a bombardment, but she agrees to present his offer to meet Isabelle to her sister because it should be her choice.



## **Section 10: France 1917, Part 4, pages 311-338**

### **Section 10: France 1917, Part 4, pages 311-338 Summary**

Stephen passes the night and next day in fitful expectation, and when he meets Jeanne, she tells him Isabelle has agreed to meet him and leads him to a house across town. Though he claims he has seen worse, Stephen is shocked by the sight of Isabelle's scarred face. She tells him about returning to Azaire and how much she regretted it, but she does not tell him about their child because it will only "make matters more painful and complicated between them" (page 315). Isabelle tells Stephen about meeting and falling in love with Max, a German soldier, whose devotion doubled after her injury. She notices Stephen has changed nearly beyond recognition, but she waits until he leaves to cry for him. Stephen is glad to talk to Isabelle, but he does not want to see her again. He leaves and returns to the Front.

The next day, Stephen visits Gray who is being pressured to give him a staff job. Stephen objects that he does not want to abandon his men now after two years, but Gray insists the brigade staff needs Stephen's fluency in French for a few months. Jack and the tunnelers have a funeral for the two men who were buried in the tunnel, and Jack cries at the loss of his friends. The next morning, Stephen receives a letter from Jeanne informing him that Isabelle has gone to Munich to be with Max. She writes because Stephen asked her to do so since he wants to hear about normal life. Her letter answers his question also; Isabelle no longer loves him, or "if she did, she loved him in some distant way that did not affect her actions or her feelings for another man" (page 335). Stephen finds he can bear the thought because their love still exists, though it exists in a different time.

### **Section 10: France 1917, Part 4, pages 311-338 Analysis**

Stephen is very nervous as he waits to learn whether Isabelle will see him, and when Jeanne informs him that Isabelle has agreed, he immediately follows her to a house in town. Stephen is shocked by Isabelle's scars, and Isabelle is struck by the changes in Stephen as well. Though she tells him she regretted returning to Azaire and about how she fell in love with Max, a German soldier, Isabelle does not tell Stephen about their child. As he leaves, Stephen tells Isabelle he does not wish to see her again. When he returns to the Front, Stephen learns that Gray is being pressured to give him a staff job because the brigade staff needs a man with his fluency in French, but Stephen opposes the idea. Jeanne writes to Stephen, foreshadowing their relationship. Though Stephen



realizes Isabelle no longer loves him, he can bear the thought because he knows their love still exists, albeit in a different time.



## Section 11: France 1917, Part 4, pages 339-374

### Section 11: France 1917, Part 4, pages 339-374 Summary

Stephen is unsure about what to write to Jeanne, so deciding he must be formal for now, he tells her about his train journey to Boulogne. The next day, he continues to Folkestone by boat and takes a train to Norfolk where he buys two shirts despite the rude salesman. He boards the train for King's Lynn where he checks into the Blackbird Inn, but unable to sleep as he recalls scenes of death he has seen during the war, he takes a walk and sits on a bench, watching two boys play until the sun descends. Stephen returns to France a day early so he can visit Jeanne, and Jeanne assures him that Isabelle is very happy with Max now. Stephen wonders if she truly views him as a friend, but he feels tranquil in her presence and dreads returning to war. Jeanne notices, assures him the war will not last forever and offers him a bed which she made up in case he wants to stay. Gray directs Stephen to lead an attack on the canal to the left before leaving for his new assignment, and as the time to attack draws near, Stephen encourages his platoon commanders. At midnight, Weir visits Stephen to warn him he has a foreboding and is worried about Stephen, but Stephen tells Weir to leave him alone. In the morning, Stephen leads his men to attack, adhering to his order to hold the line though he sees only one possible outcome: his company dead; "it was not what he had chosen, but it was all that was left to them" (page 364). Stephen is ordered to withdraw because something went wrong, so he and his men retreat.

Stephen's new job entails going over maps to ascertain which battalion is where, but on his first day, he has the unpleasant duty of writing to a mother about her son's death. He is tired of writing such passionless letters and, imagining the effect on the widow who has lost her only son, he tries not to contemplate it. During the last week before the attack, Jack's company is sent to the deep mines below the Ridge to lay tons of ammonal, and they finish their work two days before the attack. As Jack sits near the parapet imagining going home, Weir approaches, but a sniper shoots him in the head and he falls face first into the mud. When Stephen hears of Weir's death the next day, he laments that they fought the last time they were together, yet he cannot cry. As he listens to the bombardment, he tries "to think that the victory on the Ridge would bring pleasure or vindication to Weir, but he could not imagine it" (page 370). Three days later, Gray visits Stephen and tells him about the battle, causing interest to penetrate Stephen's grief. Stephen agrees to join Gray for a meeting with their French allies, but he refuses Gray's offer to recommend him for an MC because "you can't give tin stars to people when there are men who gave their lives" (page 372). Stephen finds love in the trees and buildings still standing, and he writes to Jeanne daily until he has nothing left to say. In August and September, he visits Jeanne who worries about his listlessness



and tells him to be strong for her sake. Stephen feels guilty for surviving when so many others have died; he can only manage to exist.

## **Section 11: France 1917, Part 4, pages 339-374**

### **Analysis**

Stephen finally takes leave and travels to King's Lynn. He returns to France early so that he can visit Jeanne who encourages him with the reminder that the war will not last forever. After returning to the Front, Stephen argues with Weir who is worried about their pending attack, but Stephen disregards his friend's concern. Weir's foreboding foreshadows his imminent death. Stephen urges his men forward during the attack, though he sees death as the only possible outcome. He and his men receive orders to retreat because something went wrong. Stephen dislikes the melancholy task of writing news of the deceased to their families, and he mourns Weir when he learns of his friend's death, fulfilling the earlier foreshadowing. Gray visits Stephen and offers to recommend him for an MC, but Stephen refuses the honor. Stephen is eager to return to the Front. He finds comfort in noting the objects that have not been destroyed by the war. His letters and continuing visits to Jeanne foreshadow their romantic relationship.



## Section 12: England 1978, Part 5, pages 377-403

### Section 12: England 1978, Part 5, pages 377-403 Summary

Since Bob has had little progress in the two months since Elizabeth gave him the diary, she searches for other ways of making contact with the past. At the headquarters in Buckinghamshire, she convinces a young soldier to get her access to the regimental history where she finds Colonel Gray is the dominant name. Finding Gray in "Who's Who," she phones him and asks about Stephen. Gray says Wraysford was a strange man who was very self-contained and never wanted to go on leave. Mrs. Gray suggests Elizabeth contact Brennan, a soldier who fought with Stephen, at the Star and Garter veterans' home in Southland. Though the matron of the home says Brennan is barely worth visiting due to the psychological damage he received during the war, Elizabeth visits and explains to Brennan that she is interested in learning about her grandfather. Brennan randomly talks about the war, but all he says about Stephen is that everyone thought he was mad. Elizabeth is grateful for the small fact as if "she had rescued some vital connection, she had been successful in her small errand; what she could not do, which made her curse and wring her hands, was restore poor Brennan's life or take away the pity of the past" (page 388). When Robert phones to ask if Elizabeth is free, she cancels her plans to stay in with him because his voice makes her happy and she is resigned to not thinking about the future because he will not leave his wife. While waiting for her, Robert tries to remove traces of his family from his flat; he is not usually unfaithful, but he cannot help himself with Elizabeth. They talk over dinner, and Elizabeth seems elated when she leaves.

On Saturday afternoon, Francoise phones her daughter because she finds twenty more notebooks in the attic, and Elizabeth retrieves them. For New Years, Elizabeth's resolutions are to visit Brennan or someone of his generation every other week and to read books about the war. Though she hopes to learn more about her grandfather from visiting Brennan, his answers do not refer to her questions, but she hopes it may come out in time as he grows more comfortable with her. Realizing her menstruation is past due, Elizabeth takes a pregnancy test, and it comes back positive; she feels "an absurd passion for the invisible thing inside her" (page 401). Bob phones to tell her he has cracked the code in the notebook and will send it to her on the weekend. When Elizabeth tells Robert she is pregnant, he is happy for her. He will be happy for himself and the child in time, but he needs to get used to the idea first. The next day is Saturday, and Elizabeth receives a package from Bob. She reads some of Stephen's diary which states he has lost reality since Weir's death, he cannot picture peace, and he is tired in his soul.



## Section 12: England 1978, Part 5, pages 377-403 Analysis

In England in 1978, Elizabeth begins researching the history of Stephen's regiment. She contacts Gray and Brennan and is devastated to see how the war affected them, even sixty years later. Though Brennan tells her very little about Stephen, Elizabeth still feels she has "rescued some vital connection" (page 388). The relationship between Elizabeth and Robert parallels the relationship between Stephen and Isabelle as one member is married but cannot seem to control their feelings and ultimately engages in an extramarital affair. Elizabeth retrieves more of Stephen's notebooks when her mother locates them, and she continues researching the war. When Elizabeth realizes she is pregnant, she tells Robert, unlike her grandmother, Isabelle, who did not inform Stephen when she was pregnant. Bob deciphers Stephen's code in his notebooks, allowing Elizabeth to read and understand her grandfather's journals.



## **Section 13: France 1918, Part 6, pages 407-415**

### **Section 13: France 1918, Part 6, pages 407-415 Summary**

Visiting Gray one morning, Stephen is told he is doing well and the memorial for the regiment will be a proud list, but Stephen feels "no pride in the unspeakable names" (page 408). Gray announces that Stephen's staff attachment is finished and he is returning to the Front. They are going to attack soon and Stephen can lead his old company if he wants. Gray is irritated by Stephen's indifference. After the tunnelers' work reaches its climax with the explosion at Messines Ridge, Jack writes to Margaret that they are on road repair work again. Before rejoining his company, Stephen uses two days of leave to visit Jeanne in Rouen, and she is shocked by his gray hair and vacant eyes. She updates him on Isabelle's devotion to Max and encourages him not to give up. When Stephen admits he has lost reality itself, Jeanne offers to help him find what he has lost because she loves him, and he agrees to try. They talk about their ideals for future happiness. At night, as Jeanne undresses in her bedroom, Stephen mistakenly enters when looking for the bathroom. She offers to hold him, and he drops to his knees and wraps his arms around her legs, sobbing Isabelle's name.

### **Section 13: France 1918, Part 6, pages 407-415 Analysis**

Returning to France in 1918, Stephen is sent back to the Front, but his indifference is apparent and originates from his grief at the many men he has known who have died in the war. He visits Jeanne before rejoining his company, and her admission that she loves him fulfills the foreshadowing regarding their romantic relationship. They plan for future happiness after the war ends, foreshadowing their eventual marriage. When Jeanne holds Stephen as he sobs Isabelle's name, it demonstrates that Stephen still loves Isabelle and that the war has greatly affected his mental state.



## Section 14: France 1918, Part 6, pages 416-465

### Section 14: France 1918, Part 6, pages 416-465 Summary

Stephen, Jack, Evans and Jones head underground to enlarge the listening post at the end of the main tunnel, and soon after hearing a noise, an explosion drives them backward in the tunnel. Stephen digs himself out of the dirt, and finding Jack near him, he works to free the other man whose legs have been broken from the debris falling on him. Stephen explores the other tunnels but cannot find a way to escape. He sets off an explosion as Jack begins to welcome the idea of dying. Jack tells Stephen about his dead son, and Stephen promises to name a son John in his honor. Above ground, Lieutenant Levi, a German soldier, feels the force of the blast and leads two men into their tunnel. He doubts it is the action of the enemy as they could not have survived being stuck in their tunnel for three or four days. Meanwhile, Stephen tries to encourage Jack to survive, but Jack wants to die because "when I die, I'll be with men who understand" (page 451). They hear men working to get to them, and Stephen knocks on the ceiling of the tunnel. Levi sets off an explosion so that he and his men can enter the tunnel, and he finds his brother's body. Though Stephen tries to comfort Jack with the idea that the search party is near, Jack does not want to be free; he takes his last breath, and Stephen curses him for giving up. Hearing the sounds of Stephen knocking, Levi insists on continuing the search, and he finally loosens the earth enough for Stephen to crawl from his trapped space. When Stephen notices Levi's uniform, he reaches for his revolver, but then, the resolution coming to him, he opens his arms wide. Looking at his brother's killer, Levi responds by hugging the stranger, each "weeping at the bitter strangeness of their human lives" (page 463).

After helping Stephen from the tunnel and retrieving Jack's body, Levi tells Stephen the British trench has been deserted and the German army was swept away when the dam broke; it is finished. Looking at the German trench, Stephen cannot understand what has happened, and he does not know how to reclaim his life. He lays his head on Levi's chest and weeps. They bury Joseph and Jack in one grave, weeping for their lost friends. The next day, Stephen insists he must rejoin his battalion. He shakes hands with Levi, noting "it was this doctor's hand that had signaled his deliverance" (page 465). After promising to write Levi when he returned to England, Stephen heads toward the British lines with a low exultation in his soul.



## Section 14: France 1918, Part 6, pages 416-465

### Analysis

Shortly after returning to the Front, Stephen finds himself in a tunnel underground with Jack Firebrace and two other men. An explosion from their German enemies leaves the two others dead while Stephen and Jack are trapped in the tunnel. Stephen tries to find an escape unsuccessfully. He also tries to inspire Jack with the will to live, but Jack is hopeless and desires death. When Stephen sets off an explosion in one of the tunnels in an attempt to alert his men of their survival, he causes the death of several German soldiers and alerts the Germans to his location. Lieutenant Levi searches for the imprisoned soldiers, finding his brother's body in the German tunnel; however, he hears Stephen knocking against the wall and continues searching. As Jack tells Stephen about his dead son, Stephen promises to name his son John if he ever has one in honor of Jack's son. Stephen curses Jack when he gives up on survival and dies underground. Before long, Levi finds and rescues Stephen who suppresses his hatred for the Germans in favor of his desire to live. The two men hug ironically. They bury Jack and Levi's brother in a shared grave after Stephen learns the battle is over. Stephen leaves to rejoin his battalion but promises to write Levi, his deliverer, when he returns to England. This is the last time Stephen is seen in the novel.





## Section 15: England 1979, Part 7, pages 469-483

### Section 15: England 1979, Part 7, pages 469-483 Summary

Elizabeth is nervous to tell Francoise about her pregnancy, so she puts it off as long as possible and invites her mother to dinner in London. Though she tells her friends about the baby, she refuses to admit to anyone who the father is. On Saturday morning, Elizabeth reads Stephen's account of being buried underground, and she finally feels that she has some idea of what the war was like after reading all of his notebooks. That evening, she dresses carefully and meets her mother for dinner. When she confesses that she is pregnant, Elizabeth is surprised that Francoise is delighted and does not ask about the father; Francoise does not mind that Elizabeth is not married because her mother was not married to her father. Stephen married Jeanne after the war, in 1919 when Francoise was already 7 years old. Explaining that Isabelle was her mother, Francoise tells Elizabeth about Stephen and Isabelle's affair. When Isabelle died of the flu, Francoise was sent to Jeanne who raised her as if she were Stephen and her child, and Jeanne was like a second mother to Francoise. When Elizabeth asks if Stephen was happy, Francoise admits he did not speak for two years after the war until one day when he announced they were going to the theatre in London that night. He was better after that, spoiling Francoise, but he never talked about the war. He never really recovered, and he died at the age of 48. Francoise wishes he had met Elizabeth because it would have made his heart happy.

Over the summer, Elizabeth takes prenatal classes and is filled with intense curiosity about the child growing inside her. Robert arranges to join her for the week before the birth. He is nervous, but Elizabeth assures him that everything will be alright. When she feels contractions, Elizabeth sits under the apple tree in her garden and imagines how terrifying it must have been for Isabelle to endure this alone; however, she realizes that Isabelle must have arranged for Jeanne to be with her. Elizabeth cannot imagine how things will change after the baby arrives, but Robert promises to help her. Elizabeth does not tell Robert as the contractions continue because she is not ready to go to the hospital. When the contractions resume the next morning, she admits she needs to go to the hospital, but the doctor is not available when Robert phones her. Elizabeth informs Robert that the baby is coming, and he speechlessly helps her deliver their son. Elizabeth names the baby John, after Jack Firebrace's son in accordance with the promise Stephen made to Jack. As the doctor arrives too late and cuts the cord, Elizabeth sends Robert outside for some fresh air. In the garden, Robert sobs in exhilaration at the birth of his son.



## **Section 15: England 1979, Part 7, pages 469-483 Analysis**

Back in England in 1979, Elizabeth feels she now understands Stephen after reading all of his journals. She finally musters the courage to tell Francoise she is pregnant, and she is blissfully surprised when her mother reacts to the news with joy. Francoise explains that her parents were not married. Furthermore, she tells her daughter that she lived with Jeanne and Stephen after Isabelle's death, fulfilling the foreshadowing regarding Stephen and Jeanne's marriage. Unfortunately, Stephen never really recovered from the war, and he died at the age of forty-eight. Elizabeth prepares for the birth of her child, and Robert joins her before she is due. When she goes into labor, Robert helps her deliver their son who Elizabeth names John in honor of her grandfather's promise to Jack Firebrace.



# Characters

## Stephen Wraysford

Stephen Wraysford is the protagonist of *Birdsong*. In France 1910, Stephen is sent to the Azaires in Amiens to learn about the textile factory, but his attraction to Isabelle, Mr. Azaire's wife, leads to them having an affair. Isabelle runs away with Stephen, and they live happily in a small house in St.-Remy-de-Provence. When Isabelle realizes she is pregnant, she fears for her child's future and leaves Stephen to return to her family's home, but she never tells Stephen about the child she carries. In France 1916, Stephen is a lieutenant in France during World War I. He feels disdain for his men and even for his best friend, Captain Michael Weir. Stephen refuses all offers of leave, even after he is wounded and nearly dies. A miner in the tunnels on the Front, Jack Firebrace, learns his son has died from a fever and mourns for his dead son. When the platoon is ordered to attack at Hawthorne Ridge, many of them write to their nearest relatives since the attack seems doomed to fail, and Stephen writes to Isabelle because he has no one else to write. Most of Stephen's platoon is killed during the attack.

In France 1917, Stephen runs into Jeanne while on leave in Amiens, and she agrees to take him to see Isabelle whose face was disfigured by a shell during a bombardment. Although Isabelle tells him about her relationship with Max, a German soldier, she does not mention their child for fear it would complicate matters between them. Stephen is relieved to return to the Front, and he begins corresponding with Jeanne. Shortly after Stephen is assigned to a staff job, he learns that Weir has been killed by a German sniper, and he mourns for his friend. In France 1918, Stephen and Jack Firebrace are trapped in a tunnel when the enemy sets off an explosion. Jack tells Stephen about his dead son, John, and Stephen promises to name his son John, if he ever has one. Although Jack dies in the tunnel, German Lieutenant Levi rescues Stephen who returns to the English Front. After the war, in 1919, Stephen marries Jeanne, but he does not speak for two years. After Isabelle dies, Stephen and Jeanne raise Francoise as though she were their own. Stephen never really gets over the war, and he dies at the age of forty-eight.

## Elizabeth Benson

Elizabeth Benson is the daughter of Francoise and thus the biological granddaughter of Stephen and Isabelle. She lives in a Victorian style house in London and works in a company that manufactures clothes. In "England 1978," Elizabeth becomes interested in learning about her grandfather's life and the war. In "Albert," she is struck by the magnitude of the war memorial. When she finds Stephen's journals in her mother's attic, she tries to decipher them since they are written in code.

In "England 1978-79," Elizabeth continues researching the war, and she talks to veterans about their experiences in her attempt to learn more about her grandfather.



She learns that she is pregnant with Robert, her married boyfriend's child. In "England 1979," Elizabeth feels that she knows much more about the war and her grandfather after reading all of his notebooks. When she finally tells her mother about her pregnancy, Francoise is oddly supportive and explains that she had been raised by Stephen and Jeanne after Isabelle's death. Elizabeth gives birth to her son whom she names John in honor of her grandfather's promise to Jack Firebrace.

## **Rene Azaire**

Rene Azaire is a factory owner in Amiens, France with whom Stephen resides while learning about the textile factory in Part 1. Embarrassed by his inability to impregnate his wife, Isabelle, Rene beats her to gain arousal. Though he is angry when she admits to her affair with Stephen and runs away with the younger man, Rene takes Isabelle back due to an arrangement with her father, Mr. Fourmentier. When the Germans occupy Amiens, Rene Azaire is imprisoned.

## **Isabelle Azaire**

Isabelle Azaire is Rene's wife whom he beats because he cannot impregnate her. She falls in love with Stephen, and they have an affair. After running away with Stephen, Isabelle learns she is pregnant, and fearing for her child's security, she returns to her family home without telling Stephen that she is pregnant. She regrets her decision as soon as she returns to Rene, but the war grants her freedom. Isabelle falls in love with Max, a German soldier, during the occupation of Amiens. Her face is disfigured by a shell during a bombardment, but Max remains loyal. Isabelle moves to Germany to care for Max after he is wounded in the war, but she dies of the flu shortly after the war ends, leaving Francoise, her daughter by Stephen, to be raised by Stephen and Jeanne.

## **Lisette Azaire**

Lisette Azaire is Rene's sixteen year old daughter from his first marriage. She is attracted to Stephen and is upset by his affair with Isabelle because she feels that he led her on. Later, she marries Lucien Lebrun.

## **Captain Michael Weir**

Captain Michael Weir is the officer in charge of the tunnelers on the Front, and he is Stephen's best friend during the war. Weir is killed by a German sniper.

## **Jack Firebrace**

Jack Firebrace is a miner under the command of Captain Weir. He mourns his son, John, who dies while Jack is at war. When Jack gets stuck in a tunnel with Stephen



near the end of the war, he tells Stephen about John, and Stephen promises to name his son after John if he ever has one. Jack dies before they can be rescued.

## **Jeanne Fourmentier**

Jeanne Fourmentier is Isabelle's sister and confidante. She runs into Stephen in Amiens when he is on leave in 1917 and arranges a meeting between Stephen and Isabelle. Jeanne begins corresponding with Stephen during the war, and he frequently visits her during leave. In 1919, Stephen marries Jeanne, and after Isabelle dies of the flu, Jeanne acts like a second mom to Francoise, raising her with Stephen as if her niece were her own child.

## **Francoise**

Francoise is the daughter of Stephen and Isabelle who is raised by Stephen and Jeanne after her mother dies. She is also Elizabeth's mother, and she reacts with joy when she learns her daughter is pregnant.

## **Robert**

Robert is Elizabeth's married boyfriend who will not leave his wife. After impregnating Elizabeth, he arranges to spend a week with her before the birth of their son. He helps deliver John and cries joyfully at the birth of their son.

## **John**

John is the son of Elizabeth Benson and Robert, her married boyfriend. He is also the grandson of Francoise and the great-grandson of Stephen Wraysford. Elizabeth names her son after the son of Jack Firebrace in honor of the promise her grandfather made to Jack shortly before Jack's death.



# Objects/Places

## France

France is the main setting of Parts 1, 2, 4 and 6. This is where Stephen lives with the Azaires and seduces Isabelle in Part 1. In Parts 2, 4 and 6, Stephen fights in France during World War I.

## England

England is the main setting of Parts 3, 5 and 7. This is where Elizabeth lives and where Stephen is originally from, though he rarely returns to England before the war ends.

## Front

The Front is the scene of the fighting during the war. Many men die on the Front, but Stephen often refuses leave, preferring to stay on the Front.

## Tunnels

Captain Michael Weir's men, including Jack Firebrace, work on the tunnels near the Front. They are one means of attacking the enemy, as well as protecting their own men. Several explosions throughout the novel kill men caught in the tunnels. In Part 6, Jack and Stephen are stuck in a tunnel where Jack dies, but Stephen is saved by Lieutenant Levi, a German soldier.

## Twickenham

Twickenham is a town in England where Françoise lives and where Elizabeth visits her mother several times.

## Stephen's Notebooks

Stephen writes in his notebooks daily, but he writes in code so that no one else can understand his diary. When Elizabeth finds these notebooks in her mother's attic, she has Bob, her co-worker's husband, decipher them so she can learn about her grandfather and the war. After reading the notebooks, Elizabeth feels that she knows much more about both.



## War Memorial

Elizabeth visits the war memorial in Albert where the names of the men who died in the fields surrounding Albert are inscribed on the arch. Struck by the size of the memorial and the number of names, she sits beneath the arch and cries "nobody told me."

## Amiens

Amiens is a village in France where the Azaires live. This is the main setting of Part 1 where Stephen's affair with Isabelle begins. On leave during the war, Stephen returns to Amiens where he runs into Jeanne and arranges a meeting with Isabelle. After his first visit, he visits Jeanne frequently whenever he is given leave.

## St.-Remy-de-Provence

St.-Remy-de-Provence is the town where Stephen and Isabelle live when she runs away from her husband near the end of Part 1.

## Hawthorne Ridge

Hawthorne Ridge is the location where Stephen's battalion is ordered to attack the Germans, but this mission seems doomed to fail, causing all of the men to write letters to their loved ones in preparation for their imminent deaths. The attack is a failure, and the English are forced to retreat.



# Themes

## War

War is a very important theme in *Birdsong*, and over half of the novel is set during World War I and focuses on Stephen's experiences during the war. Parts 2, 4 and 6 focus nearly exclusively on the war in fact. In France 1916, Stephen is a lieutenant in France during World War I. He feels disdain for his men and even for his best friend, Captain Michael Weir. Stephen refuses all offers of leave, even after he is wounded and nearly dies. A miner in the tunnels on the Front, Jack Firebrace, learns his son has died from a fever and mourns for his dead son. When the platoon is ordered to attack at Hawthorne Ridge, many of them write to their nearest relatives since the attack seems doomed to fail, and Stephen writes to Isabelle because he has no one else to write. Most of Stephen's platoon is killed during the attack.

In France 1917, Stephen runs into Jeanne while on leave in Amiens, and she agrees to take him to see Isabelle whose face was disfigured by a shell during a bombardment. Although Isabelle tells him about her relationship with Max, a German soldier, she does not mention their child for fear it would complicate matters between them. Stephen is relieved to return to the Front, and he begins corresponding with Jeanne. Shortly after Stephen is assigned to a staff job, he learns that Weir has been killed by a German sniper, and he mourns for his friend. In France 1918, Stephen and Jack Firebrace are trapped in a tunnel when the enemy sets off an explosion. Jack tells Stephen about his dead son, John, and Stephen promises to name his son John, if he ever has one. Although Jack dies in the tunnel, German Lieutenant Levi rescues Stephen who returns to the English Front.

## The Importance of History

A significant portion of this novel, all of the parts set in England in 1978-1979 in fact, focuses on the importance of history as seen when Elizabeth attempts to learn about her grandfather, especially his involvement in the war. In "England 1978," Elizabeth becomes interested in learning about her grandfather's life and the war. In "Albert," she is struck by the magnitude of the war memorial. When she finds Stephen's journals in her mother's attic, she tries to decipher them since they are written in code.

In "England 1978-79," Elizabeth continues researching the war, and she talks to veterans about their experiences in her attempt to learn more about her grandfather. She learns that she is pregnant with Robert, her married boyfriend's child. In "England 1979," Elizabeth feels that she knows much more about the war and her grandfather after reading all of his notebooks. When she finally tells her mother about her pregnancy, Françoise is oddly supportive and explains that she was raised by Stephen and Jeanne after Isabelle's death. Elizabeth gives birth to her son whom she names John in honor of her grandfather's promise to Jack Firebrace.





## Complex Romantic Relationships

A major theme in *Birdsong* is the complex romantic relationships in which the characters participate. The most obvious of these is the relationship between Stephen and Isabelle. When they meet, Isabelle is married, but her status as a wife does not prevent Stephen from pursuing her. They engage in an affair and eventually run away together; however, when Isabelle learns that she is pregnant, she worries for the security of her child. Isabelle does not tell Stephen about their child, even when she sees him in Amiens in 1917 during the war, because she fears that it would complicate matters between them. Though Jeanne chides Stephen for the pain he caused her sister, she begins a corresponding friendship with him, and eventually, she admits that she loves him. After the war, Stephen marries Jeanne, and they raise Françoise, the daughter of Stephen and Isabelle, after Isabelle dies of the flu.

Paralleling the tragic romance between her grandparents, Elizabeth Benson becomes romantically involved with a married man, Robert, in England during the late 1970s. While trying to learn more about the war and her grandfather, Elizabeth learns that she is pregnant with Robert's child. When she finally tells her mother about her pregnancy, Françoise is oddly supportive and explains that she was raised by Stephen and Jeanne after Isabelle's death. Elizabeth gives birth to her son whom she names John in honor of her grandfather's promise to Jack Firebrace.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person. This point of view is omniscient and reliable which is proven by the fact that the narrator knows and reports upon the thoughts of all of the characters in the novel. This is important because it allows the reader to know what each of the characters is thinking and, thus, what motives drive their actions. By allowing the reader to see these motives, the narrator also provides the reader with a very realistic account of the war as seen from the eyes of the men who fought and died.

The novel is written using a distribution of approximately seventy-five percent exposition with the remaining twenty-five percent being dialogue. This is effective since it allows the narrator's focus to remain on the thoughts of the characters which is especially important during the war when the narrator provides the thoughts of the men fighting. The viewpoint of this novel is generally given from Stephen and Elizabeth's perspectives, depending on the section of the novel. Additionally, the viewpoint alternates occasionally to that of Jack Firebrace with detours to the viewpoint of various minor characters throughout the novel.

## Setting

Birdsong is set in the real world in Europe. The specific settings alternate between the seven parts of the novel. Part 1 is set in France in 1910, and Parts 2, 4 and 6 are set in France during World War I, in 1916, 1917 and 1918 specifically. Parts 3, 5 and 7 are set in England in 1978 and 1979. During the war, the people are soldiers and officers from both the Allied Forces and the Germans. In Parts 3, 5 and 7, the main character is Elizabeth Benson, the granddaughter of Stephen Wraysford, the protagonist of the novel, who is trying to learn more about her grandfather by learning about the war.

France is the main setting of Parts 1, 2, 4 and 6. This is where Stephen lives with the Azaires and seduces Isabelle in Part 1. In Parts 2, 4 and 6, Stephen fights in France during World War I. England is the main setting of Parts 3, 5 and 7. This is where Elizabeth lives and where Stephen is originally from, though he rarely returns to England before the war ends.

The Front is the scene of the fighting during the war. Many men die on the Front, but Stephen often refuses leave, preferring to stay on the Front. Captain Michael Weir's men, including Jack Firebrace, work on the tunnels near the Front. They are one means of attacking the enemy, as well as protecting their own men. Several explosions throughout the novel kill men caught in the tunnels. In Part 6, Jack and Stephen are stuck in a tunnel where Jack dies, but Stephen is saved by Lieutenant Levi, a German soldier.



Twickenham is a town in England where Francoise lives and where Elizabeth visits her mother several times. Elizabeth visits the war memorial in Albert where the names of the men who died in the fields surrounding Albert are inscribed on the arch. Struck by the size of the memorial and the number of names, she sits beneath the arch and cries "nobody told me."

Amiens is a village in France where the Azaires live. This is the main setting of Part 1 where Stephen's affair with Isabelle begins. On leave during the war, Stephen returns to Amiens where he runs into Jeanne and arranges a meeting with Isabelle. After his first visit, he visits Jeanne frequently whenever he is given leave.

St.-Remy-de-Provence is the town where Stephen and Isabelle live when she runs away from her husband near the end of Part 1.

Hawthorne Ridge is the location where Stephen's battalion is ordered to attack the Germans, but this mission seems doomed to fail, causing all of the men to write letters to their loved ones in preparation for their imminent deaths. The attack is a failure, and the English are forced to retreat.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in this novel is fairly casual, yet formal. It varies somewhat based on the time period; the parts of the novel set during the war tend to be more formal whereas the language used in England in 1978 and 1979 seems to be more casual. This is necessary for the novel's plot as the language is dictated by the time period and location which shows a more formal language being used during the war in respect to the commanding officers and the circumstances in which the characters are found. The language used aids reader comprehension as it provides readers with a better understanding of the time period and the situational instability of the war.

The language utilized in *Birdsong* characterizes the time, status of life and the characters. The language tends to be more formal in the earlier setting as World War I is being fought because of the hierarchy of the military as well as the danger of the situation. In contrast, Parts 3, 5 and 7 tend to present a much more casual style of language since these characters are not at war. In fact, most of the characters in these sections tend to disregard the war as ancient history. The novel is written using a distribution of approximately seventy-five percent exposition with the remaining twenty-five percent being dialogue. This is effective since it allows the narrator's focus to remain on the thoughts of the characters which is especially important during the war when the narrator provides the thoughts of the men fighting. Occasionally, the jargon used in reference to the war is a bit difficult to comprehend because the modern reader may not be familiar with some of the terms. Overall, the language is fairly easy to understand, and it is very useful in aiding the readers' comprehension of the time and circumstances presented in the novel.

## Structure

Birdsong is divided into seven parts and is comprised of four hundred, eighty-three pages. These parts range from fifteen pages to over one hundred pages, and they are titled according to the year and country in which they are set. Parts 3, 5 and 7, those set in England in 1978 and 1979, are much shorter than Parts 1, 2, 4 and 6, those set in France in 1910 and during World War I. Each part is quite detailed, and in accordance with the titles of each part, they tend to cover a period of approximately one year.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks is a novel about World War I and its effects on the novel's protagonist, Stephen Wraysford, as well as his granddaughter, Elizabeth Benson. Before the war, Stephen has an affair with a married woman which produces a child of which he is unaware. Stephen fights the Germans during the war and is deeply affected by the violence he witnesses. Sixty years later, Elizabeth becomes interested in learning about her grandparents and studies the war to gain a better understanding of her grandfather, Stephen. Birdsong is an interesting and entertaining novel about how war affects those who serve in battle and how the history of war is important for those in the future seeking to understand the past.

The pace of the novel is fairly slow, and the action alternates between World War I in France and England in 1978-1979. Flashbacks are used during the war as Stephen recalls his time spent with Isabelle and the faces of men who were lost during the war. Birdsong is easy to read as the details provided regarding the characters' thoughts and feelings reveal their motivations to the reader. This novel is interesting and touching as it offers a realistic account of war and its aftereffects while stressing the importance of remembering the past so mankind is not doomed to make the same mistakes.



## Quotes

"Madame Azaire grew into her new name. She was content with the role she had accepted and thought that her ambitious desires could be safely and permanently forgotten. It was, by a paradox she did not seem to understand at the time, the cold figure of her husband who kept those desires alive." Narrator, France 1910, Part 1, page 36

"I am driven by a greater force than I can resist. I believe that force has its own reason and its own morality even if they may never be clear to me while I am alive." Stephen, France 1910, Part 1, page 49

"Although his mind worked clearly and had never had any difficulty in dispatching the tasks set for it by schoolmasters or employers, Stephen had not developed the habit of analysis. His confidence in himself was not checked by judgement; he followed where nothing more than instinct took him, and relied on some reflexive wariness to help. Looking at Isabelle, he knew also that the feeling he had for her was of a kind seldom experienced, and therefore he was obliged to follow it." Narrator, France 1910, Part 1, page 81

"But that's what you will do. You will leave the husband who beats you and go with the man who loves you. Lisette is not your child. You've already done well by her, you've been helpful to her. But you must live your own life eventually. You have one chance only." Stephen, France 1910, Part 1, page 87

"I don't want this. I don't know what to do or how to behave now. I could be happy in the simplest way, like any other woman with a family of her own, without this terrible pain I've caused. I won't listen to either of you. Why should I? How do I know that you love me, Stephen? How can I tell? And you, Rene, why should I trust you when you have given me so little reason even to like you? This is not a situation anyone can be prepared for. Nothing I have learned in religion, or from my family or my own thoughts is any help to me. I won't be painted as some sort of whore by you, Rene. I'm a frightened woman, no more than that- not an adulterer, or a harlot or anything else. I'm just the same person I ever was, but you never took the trouble to find out what that was." Isabelle, France 1910, Part 1, pages 92-93

"She had returned because she felt she could save her soul. She had gone home because she was frightened of the future and felt sure a natural order could yet be resumed. He had no choice but to continue with what he had begun." Narrator, France 1910, Part 1, page 113

"Every one of the men we've killed is someone's son. Do you think of that when you see them dead? Do you wonder what their mothers thought when they first held them to their breast- that they would end like this?" Stephen, France 1916, Part 2, page 131



"This eruption of natural fear brought home how unnatural was the existence they were leading; they did not wish to be reminded of normality." Narrator, France 1916, Part 2, page 143

"You've got to make them love you, Wraysford, that's the secret... They'll fight better. And they'll feel better about it, too. They don't want to have their brains blown out in the service of some stuffed shirt." Captain Gray, France 1916, Part 2, pages 158-159

"At that moment, as they left the village and its trappings of normality, time seemed to stall and collapse. The next three days passed in the closing of an eye; yet the images retained a fearful static quality that stayed in the mind until death." Narrator, France 1916, Part 2, page 209

"If I die, Wraysford, and you are still alive, I want you to take charge of the company... Because you are a mad, cold-hearted devil and that is what we are going to need." Captain Gray, France 1916, Part 2, page 211

"I feel there's a danger of losing touch with the past. I've never felt it before. I'm sure it is something to do with my age." Elizabeth, England 1978, Part 3, page 240

"I'm not sure it is ancient history. It isn't very long ago. There must be old men alive now who fought in it." Elizabeth, England 1978, Part 3, page 246

"Wrong war, wrong man. After all she had seen, after all the names on that great arch, they had come back for more barely twenty years later. If she herself were to have a boy, what guarantee was there that he too would not spend years of his adult life in this hellish perversion?" Narrator, England 1978, Part 3, page 258

"Stephen knew what they felt because he had been with them and he himself did not feel hardened or strengthened by what he had seen; he felt impoverished and demeaned. He shared their conspiracy of fortitude, but sometimes he felt for them what he felt for himself, not love but pitiful contempt." Narrator, France 1917, Part 4, page 270

"It's all I have, my life. In these conditions you just want to hold on to it. Perhaps I will do something with it later, perhaps it will all come clear." Weir, France 1917, Part 4, page 281

"You must understand that what you did caused great suffering, to her husband and particularly to his children. It was a scandal. Of course Isabelle is not absolved from responsibility. Far from it- her life is ruined because people do blame her for what happened. But as for you, there are people in this town who would gladly shoot you for what you did." Jeanne, France 1917, Part 4, page 307

"I regretted it the moment I stepped inside the house. But this time I knew I could never change my mind. I would have to stay. Within a few months what they call 'society' had taken me back. I was asked to dinner by Monsieur and Madame Berard. It was the old life, though even worse. But I was saved by the war." Isabelle, France 1917, Part 4, page 318



"It isn't easy. These choices are all very, very difficult. But the longer the war goes on, the more determined we have become." Isabelle, France 1917, Part 4, page 321

"I have made this mistake in my life: not once but twice I have loved someone more than my heart would bear." Jack Firebrace's thought, France 1917, Part 4, page 331

"Then when the moment came it brought a sudden fear and unreality. They could never be prepared to look at death in the crude form that awaited them." Narrator, France 1917, Part 4, page 336

"All those boys of eighteen and nineteen who walk out in the morning and I have to go with them and watch. Just please for once try to talk about something else." Stephen, France 1917, Part 4, page 358

"Now that Weir was gone there was no one who could understand. He tried to make himself cry, but no tears would come to express his desolation or his love for poor mad Weir." Narrator, France 1917, Part 4, page 370

"I'm not sure I've quite made myself clear. This man lives in a world of his own. They all do. They have no interest in the outside world at all. Some of them can't help it, of course. But everything's done for them. Meals, toilet, everything." Mrs. Simpson, England 1978-79, Part 5, page 385

"Elizabeth was struck, not for the first time, by the thought that her life was entirely frivolous. It was a rush and slither of trivial crises; of uncertain cash flow, small triumphs, occasional sex, and too many cigarettes; of missed deadlines that turned out not to matter; of arguments, new clothes, bursts of altruism, and sincere resolutions to address the important things. Of all these and the other experiences that made up her life, the most significant aspect was the one suggested by the words 'turned out not to matter'. Although she was happy enough with what she had become, it was this continued sense of the easy, the inessential nature of what she did, that most irritated her. She thought of Tom Brennan, who had known only life or death, then death in life. In her generation there was no intensity." Narrator, England 1978-79, Part 5, pages 396-397

"I have tried to resist the slide into this unreal world, but I lack the strength. I am tired. Now I am tired in my soul." Stephen, England 1978-79, Part 5, page 403

"I can't remember my life. I wouldn't know where to look for it... I would do what you say. But it's not the details of a life I've lost. It's the reality itself." Stephen, France 1918, Part 6, page 413

"It's strange, isn't it? That I should be with you at the time I die. Of all the people I've known in my life that it should be you." Jack Firebrace, France 1918, Part 6, page 431

"I don't mind dying. God knows, with all these men dead we couldn't ask for anything better." Stephen, France 1918, Part 6, page 436



"Stephen looked down to the floor of the German trench. He could not grasp what had happened. Four years that had lasted so long it seemed that time had stopped. All the men he had seen killed, their bodies, their wounds. Michael Weir. His pale face emerging from his burrow underground. Byrne like a headless crow. The tens of thousands who had gone down with him that summer morning. He did not know what to do. He did not know how to reclaim his life." Narrator, France 1918, Part 5, page 464

"Do you mind? Does it matter to you? I hope not, because it doesn't matter to me. Where there is real love between people, as there was between all of us, then the details don't matter. Love is more important than the flesh-and-blood facts of who gave birth to whom." Francoise, England 1979, Part 7, page 473

"It's... John... It's a promise. A promise... made by my grandfather." Elizabeth, England 1979, Part 7, page 482



# Topics for Discussion

Why do the events in *Birdsong* alternate between World War I and the 1970s?

Why does Stephen Wraysford join the British military, and how does he feel about the war after spending some time fighting?

What is the significance of Part 1 to the rest of *Birdsong*?

Who is Francoise, and why is she an important figure in this novel?

Who is Jack Firebrace, and what role does he play in *Birdsong*?

Why is Elizabeth curious about Stephen?

How does the war affect Stephen, during and after?

Who is Jeanne, and how is she important to Isabelle, Stephen and Francoise?