

# The Doom Stone Short Guide

## The Doom Stone by Paul Zindel

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## About the Author

Paul Zindel was born in Staten Island, New York, on May 15, 1936. His father abandoned the family when Zindel was still very young, and this desertion may be the source of the many broken families in his writings. His family, dogged by poverty, moved frequently in New York. Zindel was diagnosed with tuberculosis when he was fifteen and was placed in a sanatorium for a year and a half, delaying his graduation from high school by a year. He attended Wagner College, earning a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1958, and eventually a master's in chemistry. After a brief stint as a technical writer, he became a high school chemistry teacher, teaching on Staten Island from 1959 to 1969.

He had already begun writing plays *The Doom Stone* 4563 while in college, and his interest in writing combined with his interest in his teenage students led him to write *The Pigman* (1968; see separate entry, Vol. 3), a novel for young adults that was well received and landed on several best-books-for-children lists. Although he published other well-received novels for young adults, it was a play that brought him national stature as an important writer. Produced off-Broadway, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* was a notable success, winning several drama awards and the 1971 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Although generally regarded as a play for adults when it was first produced, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* has since been recommended as a best-of-the-best work for young adults by the American Library Association.

Zindel married on October 25, 1973, and has had two children.

He presently lives in New York and has become one of the most admired writers for young adults.

*The Doom Stone* is one of the best thrillers ever written specifically for young adults. Zindel provides an exceptionally detailed background for the novel's monster, with good explanations of where it came from and how it evolved. These essential details add credibility to the events of the novel and heighten the narrative's tension because the monster is so realistically depicted as a horrible threat. The narrative is fast-paced, filled with suspenseful scenes that make *The Doom Stone* a gripping novel.

## Setting

The events of *The Doom Stone* take place in England, in the region around Stonehenge. Stonehenge itself is a monumental complex of gigantic stones accompanied by burial sites.

People have speculated about Stonehenge's purpose for many centuries, but no one as yet knows all of its secrets due to the antiquity of its builders and the paucity of historical evidence about them. The culture that built Stonehenge predated the Celtic peoples who lived in Britain in the time of the Romans. Druids have laid claim to it, but the structure predates their religion and culture by hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Scientists are now fairly sure of where the stones came from, as Zindel explains in *The Doom Stone*. They even have some evidence for how the enormous stones were transported, although there is still much disagreement over how to interpret the evidence. The most popular current scientific theory is that Stonehenge was constructed so that priests would identify seasonal events such as solstices, that would have helped in timing planting and harvesting crops.

Zindel borrows this idea to create his nineteen-year cycle of the moon. Of the many myths based on Stonehenge, Zindel borrows from those that portray the ritual sacrifices held among the stones of Stonehenge, thus evolving his invention of a stone of doom.

## Social Sensitivity

The Doom Stone has a scene in which a soldier "knew he was being eaten alive" and features a horrifying monster with no nose and streams of slime pouring out of his face, but taken as a whole The Doom Stone is surprisingly free of descriptions that could prove worrisome to some readers. The early killing of Richards establishes just how horrible Skull Face is; hereafter similar horrifying events are always hauntingly possible. Zindel then develops suspense by playing on this potential for catastrophe, putting his protagonists in situations in which the worst could happen at any moment, but he does not actually show any more terrible devourings or gruesome dismemberings. The possibility for such events is enough to build a considerable amount of suspense.

Zindel's frequent descriptions of the monster who has translucent skin, a hole for a nose, jagged pointed teeth, and streams of saliva and nasal secretions serve to heighten the frightfulness of events, especially when he pursues Alma and Jackson up the scaffolding around a cathedral tower, but readers are likely to place Skull Face among the many other monsters they have been exposed to in books and motion pictures. Those who already relish frightening stories will especially take Skull Face in stride.

For those unfamiliar with stories of monstrous beasts, they are in the hands of a master storyteller who will lead them through even the scariest moments. On the other hand, few monsters are given as much depth as Skull Face has, and his complex character makes him not only more memorable than most fictional monsters but also more menacing.



# Literary Qualities

The Doom Stone is proof that the written word can still dominate television and motion pictures in the creation of captivating imaginary worlds.

Could a film version of *The Doom Stone* possibly equal the novel's thrills, terror, and suspense? Even George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* movies, would find such a task a great challenge.

The story techniques Zindel uses are familiar, going back almost two centuries to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818; see separate entry, Vol. 5), but they are masterfully blended by the author's skill, experience, and talent.

One technique is to set the extraordinary against the ordinary. That is, Zindel places *Skull Face* amid familiar types of people—soldiers, priests, teenagers; the underground world of *Stonehenge* is juxtaposed with the world of the heavily-visited tourist site. This technique was used by Mary Shelley, and it may be found in other thrillers; think of a favorite horror movie, perhaps *Halloween* (1978) or one of its sequels, and how frightening events are set in ordinary neighborhoods or other familiar locations.

Another technique that Zindel employs is action in an exotic locale.

*Stonehenge* itself is a fascinating mystery, and with the proper effects of mist and darkness it becomes not just a tourist trap but a monument built in response to evil beyond modern humanity's experience. Beneath *Stonehenge* is another exotic world in which a hominid species has evolved; it is frighteningly old and dark, and Jackson and Alma's scramble to escape to daylight is as scary as can be—it is a world to which *Skull Face* is superbly adapted but for which Jackson and Alma are ill-prepared. For American readers, the setting in England is somewhat exotic, and Zindel emphasizes this with details such as unfamiliar names for highways and the burial mounds scattered across a plain of farms. This exotic quality is further enhanced by the changeable weather that is one moment cold and wet and the next sunny and dry. Authors have long known that audiences love to be transported to unfamiliar places, especially ones in which remarkable events can occur. Homer knew this when he composed the *Odyssey* about three thousand years ago, endowing his remote islands with witches and oneeyed giants, and Zindel uses this technique to very good effect. One moment his England is exotic but somewhat familiar, with garages, dune buggies, sandwiches, music, and even a girl living over a crematorium, and the next it is dark, with every step taken risking a plunge in the caverns of *Skull Face*'s home.

If there is a misstep in Zindel's technique, it would be sticking to the conventions of horror literature for young adults too closely. It is now standard fare to feature young adults who are at odds with adult establishments such as the military. The logic behind this is fairly straightforward. It is in the nature of adolescents to be rebellious against social restraints, thus an author creates situations in which that natural rebelliousness



is justified, making a story more appealing to young readers who will empathize with the insubordinate protagonists.

In present day popular fiction, television, and motion pictures, the military is often presented as trying to cover something up, whether it be the landings of creatures from outer space or the creation of doomsday weapons. In *The Doom Stone*, the military covers up the facts of Skull Face's existence without explanation—as if readers are supposed to accept that the military automatically covers everything up, including the existence of a hominid seen by multitudes of people as it made its way along the heights of a cathedral tower. A much more likely scenario is worldwide broadcasting of the remarkable discovery of a new species that lives underground, and the military's championing itself as the savior of England from a ravaging monster. After all, once the monster is dead, what is there left to cover up?



## Themes and Characters

He saw its skin, a transparent membrane pulled taut over a huge skull, and within the black sockets below its distended brow two narrow, red, murderous eyes.

Where its nose should have been was a ragged, oozing hole. The monster cocked its head as if showing off its neck wound, glared at Jackson as it thrust its twisted fangs out at the window, and began to pound the aircraft with its insectlike extremities.

Thus Jackson Cawley, the protagonist of *The Doom Stone*, has his first good look at Skull Face, the murderous monster he battles for the rest of the novel. Skull Face is a wellthought-out creature; Zindel even touches on its evolutionary history. It represents a species of hominid (humanlike creatures) previously unknown to science. Its transparent skin and red eyes are the result of having evolved in the sunless underground, and its fangs enable it to eat a wide variety of prey: rodents and small mammals at first, then eventually large game such as cattle, which it hunts primarily at night. It is also intelligent, a quality needed in order to survive in a land dominated by human beings. Even so, ancient peoples figured out ways to combat its threat to life and property, which is one of the secrets of Stonehenge.

Jackson Cawley is a good-looking fifteen-year-old from New York who makes an excellent companion for the reader. He is intelligent without showing off, courageous without being stupid, and quick on his feet—necessary traits for anyone who confronts a violent monster capable of tearing him limb from limb. Zindel refrains from describing Jackson all at once, allowing Jackson's character to unfold during the narrative's action. Early on, he is shown to have traits typical of teenage boys: He likes to eat, he loves driving far and wide on a dune buggy, and he enjoys the company of girls.

That he is openminded is revealed by his interest in Alma, a girl who lives over a crematorium and who therefore cannot get dates—the boys are spooked by the graveyard and repulsed by having to visit a crematorium in order to see her. Jackson likes Alma and does not allow the peculiar circumstances of her life to put him off.

He is also an assertive person capable of decisive action. When his aunt is incapacitated, he continues her work, figuring out where Skull Face's home is and taking Alma to the darkroom at the crematorium to develop her photographs of the hominids they found.

His take-charge attitude is tempered by his ability to make mistakes. These mistakes seem natural, not inspired by stupidity but rather by a lack of understanding of the abilities of Skull Face. This makes Jackson easy to tolerate—perfection would be annoying— and it allows Skull Face to show off his menacing qualities. For example, Skull Face's great strength enables him to unexpectedly break in on Alma and Jackson, and his ability to anticipate Jackson's moves, allows him to very nearly kill the teenage pair.





The other characters in *The Doom Stone* are not as fully realized as Jackson, although a few are given individualizing traits. Alma is pretty, sensitive to the needs of her father, and, in spite of feeling afraid most of the time, courageous. She uses her head and hangs tough in situations in which she could be forgiven for giving up. Her research into the Stonehenge legends helps solve some of the mysteries surrounding Skull Face and Stonehenge; she is plucky enough to go out with Jackson to search for Skull Face's home; she does not give way to panic when Skull Face chases her. She is especially appealing for her fear; the story is frightening and most sensible people would be afraid, which makes Alma someone who could represent the average reader in a very suspenseful plot.

Aunt Sarah, otherwise known as Dr.

Sarah Cawley, serves primarily as a plot device, although she is well developed for a secondary character. At first, she is the excuse for Jackson to fly from the United States to England.

Her work provides Jackson with the opportunity to become involved in the hunt for Skull Face. And her infection with Skull Face's venom shows off one of the creature's most intimidating attributes, the ability to know what others are thinking, making Skull Face an even more terrifying opponent. It is in her resistance to Skull Face's venom that Aunt Sarah's personality is most fully developed. It is already clear that she is intelligent, perceptive, and strong minded. These traits are displayed in her analyzing what Skull Face was likely to do and in her handling of the military men in the helicopter. When she is hospitalized with her injuries, much of her inner character is revealed. Authors frequently use great stress to strip away the social exterior of a personality in order to show readers what the inner core of that character is like; having one's mind taken over by another being is about as stressful as life gets. Aunt Sarah shows herself able to keep thinking even when Skull Face's influence is strong; her concern for her nephew shows a loving heart; her ability to tell him some of what is happening to her and some of what she has learned by sharing Skull Face's mind shows that she combines a disciplined mind with courage.

## Topics for Discussion

1. Is Skull Face's death because of the tiles made from the doom stone coincidence or fulfillment of the verses Alma found in an old book on Stonehenge?
2. Why does Zindel end the novel with another Skull Face?
3. Why would the military or police in England want to keep the fact of Skull Face's existence secret?
4. What aspects of his behavior show that Skull Face is intelligent?
5. What scenes are the most suspenseful? What makes them suspenseful?
6. Why do we readers care about what happens to the characters in The Doom Stone?
7. Does The Doom Stone read as though Zindel has actually visited Stonehenge? Could he have seen the shadows that looked like a skull, and could this have inspired the novel?
8. What do American readers learn about England from The Doom Stone?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are some of the theories about the original uses for Stonehenge? Which ones have the greatest scientific validity?
2. What are the best scientific explanations for how Stonehenge was built?
3. What are the myths and fairy tales that Stonehenge has inspired?
4. At the novel's end, Alma, Jackson, and Aunt Sarah are to return to Stonehenge in a year's time. Write a short story about what they find and the adventure that awaits them.
5. Aunt Sarah's expertise is used to help solve mysteries. What do real-life physical anthropologists do to help police solve crimes? How do they go about identifying skulls and bones, and what do they learn?
6. The Doom Stone mentions military bases near Stonehenge. What military bases are in the region of Stonehenge?

What are the bases for?

7. Zindel says that the moon has a nineteen-year cycle. What is this cycle? How have various cultures used the moon's cycles in their religions and other social practices?
8. What are hominids? What different kinds have there been? Is there any disagreement among scientists over what a hominid is? What would make Skull Face and the little white creatures hominids?

## For Further Reference

Engelfried, Steven. *School Library Journal* 41, 12 (December 1995): 132.

High praise of *The Doom Stone*, strongly recommending it for libraries.

*Publishers Weekly* 242, 49 (December 4, 1995): 63. Highly recommends *The Doom Stone* for young readers who like thrillers.

Sherman, Chris. *Booklist* 92, 8 (December 15, 1995): 698-699. A rave review that praises *The Doom Stone* for its gripping suspense.



## Related Titles

The Doom Stone is one of a series of thrillers that Zindel has recently been writing. The others are *Loch* (1994; see separate entry, Vol. 9) and *Reef of Death* (1998; see separate entry, Vol. 9) which, like *The Doom Stone*, both feature frightful monsters. Just as the plot of *The Doom Stone* turns on the fate of its monsters so does the plot of *Loch* turn on the destiny of its plesiosaurs. In *Reef of Death* the monster fills a secondary role as one among several sources of chills. In *Loch*, three young people take on a rapacious research expedition bent on capturing the plesiosaurs dead or alive—more likely dead. In *Reef of Death*, two young adults and an elderly man take on an illegal mining operation that is disguised as a research ship. The bloody scenes in these novels surpass those in *The Doom Stone*, providing vivid descriptions of dismemberment and gore. Both *Reef of Death* and *Loch* feature strong characterizations and appealing protagonists, as does *The Doom Stone*. *Reef of Death* uses a similar plot device to move its main character from America to a foreign land; in the case of *Reef of Death*, main character PC McPhee goes to Australia to work with his uncle as he has done in previous summers, whereas Jackson goes to England to work with his aunt. Of *Loch* and *Reef of Death*, *Loch* has the greater literary merit, featuring as it does a more complex plot into which the characterizations are seamlessly woven; *Reef of Death* features a somewhat more common plot, familiar from numerous monster movies. *The Doom Stone* surpasses the other novels in sheer gripping suspense, although those who enjoyed reading *The Doom Stone* are likely to enjoy both *Loch* and *Reef of Death*.



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