

# The Pit Short Guide

## The Pit by Dafydd ab Hugh

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## Overview

Jeanette Dianne Taylor and her boyfriend, Neil Armstrong, have endured a terrible ordeal in which Jeanette killed another teenager, Bill Hicks, and Neil lost part of a leg.

Although Neil seems to be adapting to his prosthetic leg, he is plainly troubled by a secret that prevents him from making the commitment that Jeanette wants from him.

On the other hand, Jeanette is not handling the killing very well. She needs proof that Bill Hicks was what she thought he was—a psychopathic murderer who would have killed her if she had not killed him. Like a good detective, she seeks out clues to his past, hoping to find an explanation for his behavior and a definitive answer as to whether she is a murderer or a victim who successfully defended herself. *The Pit* is a detective story, with Jeanette and Neil working their way into the secrets of Bill's life.

## About the Author

Dafydd Ab Hugh was born in 1960. He received a master's degree in mathematics from the University of California at Los Angeles, and his career as a novelist began in 1987, with the publication of *Heroing*.

## Setting

The Pit begins in a California suburb, where Jeanette and Neil live next door to each other, and where Bill once lived some distance away. The discovery of photographs of Jeanette in Bill's abandoned home propels Jeanette and Neil into Bill's sick world. They end up in Texas, where Bill lived after his family moved away from California. There they deal with a suspicious motel clerk and a number of suspicious school officials as they track down Bill's former Texas home and uncover the grisly truth behind his behavior.

## Social Sensitivity

The Pit is a grim psychological drama that delves into the darkest aspects of human nature. Hard-hitting and straightforward, it is bound to appeal to teenagers who want to read serious dramas about the aspects of life that are most important to them. Ab Hugh takes his readers seriously, and young readers who are tired of fluff that treats their minds and emotions as trivial may be gratified by this author's willingness to take them on a perilous journey into the contradictions of the human mind. On the other hand, Bill's life was one of perversion and appalling cruelty. Those who are offended by sexual themes in young adult literature will sympathize with readers who find Bill's perverted sexuality to be indigestible. In addition, grownups may object to Jeanette's frankly stated sexual desires and her yearning for a sexual relationship with Neil. Yet even in Jeanette's sexual desires, which seem quite normal in contrast to Bill's ugly life, Ab Hugh is unyielding in his portrait of the conflicting passions of the human heart. Jeanette and Neil, through foolish confusion created by Bill's imagination more than anything else, come to view each other too much as sister and brother and are unable to begin a physical relationship. Even though she has vindicated her perceptions and motivations, Jeanette still has far to travel before she can form the stable romantic bond that she yearns for.

# Literary Qualities

The Pit contrasts with its predecessors *Swept Away* and *The Mountain* in that it is a detective story rather than a thriller.

Jeanette's behavior was not logical in *Swept Away* and *The Mountain*, clouded as it was by conflicting emotions that she had trouble controlling, but in *The Pit* she puts her mind to work, using her education and the mental discipline it has taught her to organize a logical hunt for clues. She is still uncertain of her true motivations, but she hunts for clues as logically and methodically as the protagonists in classic detective stories, such as Sherlock Holmes or Philip Marlowe.

Although the structure of *The Pit* is that of a detective story, its content is a psychological study of a young woman under terrible stress. As she uncovers the truth about Bill, the reader slowly uncovers the truth about her. The first and most important clue is implicit in the narrative from the beginning: Jeanette feels remorse. If she were a deranged killer, remorse is not a feeling she would be likely to have, yet she has it in abundance. This suggests that at the very least she is not the psychotic she fears she is. Other clues are revealed as she responds to her discoveries. Her eye is keen and her deductions reasonable, suggesting that what she perceives is real, not the result of an overactive imagination. Thus, as the detective story unfolds, the story of Jeanette's character unfolds, revealing at last a whole human being whose understanding of the realities of life is sound.



## Themes and Characters

The trappings of sensational murders notwithstanding, *The Pit* is primarily a novel about two characters, Jeanette, who narrates the novel, and her boyfriend Neil. At 5 feet 10 inches and only 125 pounds, Jeanette is taller than Neil but not necessarily as heavy. She has an attitude problem—a bitterness stemming from the loss of her father in a car accident—and she tends to be sarcastic, even when talking to herself.

Jeanette waxes hot and cold on a number of issues, particularly her relationship with Neil, a friend since early childhood. "Never date a friend never, never! It totally bites, because you never know how to treat each other," she declares at one moment of frustration with him. Soon she is yearning to make love to him; Neil is understandably confused by her behavior and put off by it.

Both characters have deep, dark secrets.

Jeanette is driven by at least two secrets.

Neil's secret is also very unsettling. He knows that his mother was unfaithful to his father, and he knows that Jeanette's father had sex with his mother. So far as he can tell, he is the half-brother of Jeanette, someone to whom he is sexually attracted and who often makes passes at him. He is very afraid that their romance could be incestuous.

All this adds up to a lot of unnerving emotional baggage for the two characters, putting them under a great deal of stress even before Jeanette decides to track down Bill's beloved Lalla and determine whether he murdered her. With their hearts already severely tested by misfortune (Neil has lost part of his leg during the same adventure in which Jeanette killed Bill) and spiritually depressed by events largely out of their control, Jeanette and Neil are tested to their limits by the nightmare world of Bill and Lalla.

Most fiction features characters under stress because stress allows the author to reveal their basic natures. Because in a character study the personalities of the characters are more important than the events of the story, placing the characters under stress is the primary purpose of the plot. Ab Hugh is skilled at drawing out the personalities of One is the death of her father and half-brother Jason when Jason, under the influence of drugs, wrecked their car. She has much unresolved anger toward her father for setting a bad example for Jason, and she feels abandoned by him—a feeling that affects her relationships with boys. Her other secret, one that she divulges only to Neil, is that she is unsure whether she was justified in killing Bill Hicks, a seemingly psychotic former playmate. She is profoundly unsettled by the possibility that she acted irrationally and killed an innocent person. Her inability to answer the question raised by this second secret motivates her search for the truth, an attempt to convince herself that she isn't "a homicidal maniac ...!"





his characters in *The Pit* while still retaining some mystery about them. Thus, the suspense of the novel depends on what is revealed about Jeanette: Who or what is she really? Ab Hugh maintains tension in the plot by only slowly revealing her innermost personality. Only at the end are matters clarified—she is not a brilliant psychotic but a somewhat egotistical and sane person. She also discovers inner reserves of courage and energy beyond what she might have believed possible before her adventure began.

One way Ab Hugh is able to reveal Jeanette's psychology is by having her confide her secrets to the reader in her role as the narrator of the novel. On the other hand, Neil is placed at a distance from the reader because what is revealed about him is filtered through Jeanette, who is plainly confused about her feelings for him and who is very judgmental (because of her father's foolish behavior) about other people. This distanced perspective plays a role in the gruesome and violent events near the end of the novel. Under extreme physical as well as emotional stress, Neil's personality becomes unmistakable—he reveals an ability to keep his mind alert and focused, even when severely injured. It is he, not the panicking Jeanette, who finds the spare tire for the truck in a magnetic case in a wheel well.

His fortitude makes him a good match for the strong-minded Jeanette.

At the novel's end, both Jeanette and Neil have learned much about themselves from their adventures. Always self-conscious and self-critical, Jeanette becomes even more introspective and in some ways even more awkward in her relationships with others, although she values her mother's overprotective response to her injuries.

Neil, too, seems self-conscious about their relationship—the mere possibility of being related has made the still emotionally raw teenagers too uncomfortable at the thought of romance for their relationship to become more than a long friendship.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is Jeanette a reliable narrator? What does she do to help us trust what she says?
2. What about the manner of her father's death especially troubles Jeanette? How does it motivate her behavior?
3. How does Jeanette separate the truth from her imaginings?
4. Should Jeanette have asked for help from grownups in her search for Lalla?
5. Why was Lalla able to get away with her crimes for as long as she did?
6. Jeanette says that "the most important thing in my life was to find out whether I did right when I killed Bill Hicks."

Was that truly the most important thing in her life? Does she get a definitive answer?

7. Why is Neil reluctant to help Jeanette in her search into Bill's past?
8. Is all the lying that Jeanette and Neil do justified? Are any alternatives to lying available to them?
9. Neil says to Jeanette, "Honey, whether Lalla is alive or dead, the real question is whether you were doing the best or only thing you could when you kicked Bill off the cliff." Is he right or wrong?
10. What drives Jeanette to do what she does? Why is she very demanding of others? Why is she sarcastic and angry?
11. Why does Jeanette not give up and return home after Neil hypnotizes her and she realizes that she was defending herself when Bill died?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the typical characteristics of serial killers according to psychological researchers? Does either Lalla or Bill have these characteristics?
2. What are the questions raised in *Swept Away* and *The Mountain* that are settled in *The Pit*? How are they answered?

What questions still go unanswered?

3. How are substitute teachers given their teaching assignments? How does your school district make sure that they go to the right schools? Are there any safeguards against impostors?
4. What steps can authorities legally take to help someone who is as mentally ill as Bill Hicks seems to have been? Are there any effective treatments?
5. Jeanette breaks into secured computer files at the hospital. How do hospitals secure their files? How vulnerable are they to break-ins? Could someone like Jeanette be prevented from finding a way into the files?
6. Why does Neil hypnotize Jeanette? Does he do what real-life hypnotists do? How does the scientific community view the validity of hypnotism for recovering memories?
7. "I'm a minor and I have no idea what Texas law says about carrying guns, concealed or open or in a car or whatever," Jeanette says. What are your state's laws about carrying handguns? What do the laws say about minors carrying handguns?
8. Jeanette often quotes from literature.

What do these quotations reveal about her character? What do they reveal about the plot of *The Pit*?

## For Further Reference

"Dafydd Ab Hugh." In *Contemporary Authors*. Vol. 154. Edited by Terrie M. Rooney. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997, pp. 1-2.

Describes Ab Hugh's early works *Heroing* and *Warriorwards* (1990).



## Related Titles

The Pit is the third in a series of novels about the adventures of Jeanette. The first, *Swept Away*, tells about her setting off on a weekend hike with friends, only to find herself in a struggle for survival when a dam gives way and a flood sweeps her and her companions away from each other. During the ordeal, she copes with a big, hulking boyfriend whom she does not want, jealousy over the affection between a longtime friend and a rival girl, and the bizarre antics of Bill Hicks, who may be a serial killer. The novel is a psychological drama in which Jeanette is never sure of her own motivations and perceptions; it leaves open the possibility that she is actually the person who is deranged.

After *Swept Away* comes its sequel, *The Mountain*. At the end of the first novel, Jeanette and her companions still must find a way out of the flood-ravaged valley, and in *The Mountain* handsome Dwayne, crazed Bill, and Jeanette struggle up a mountainside toward safety. In *Swept Away*, Bill had tried to rape Jeanette, or at least she thought he had, and in *The Mountain* he seems bent on killing her. When he seems about to shove her off a cliff side, she instead sends him plunging to his death. The police believe her account, but she has profound misgivings about her perceptions, wondering whether she imagined the threat and whether she herself is the deranged murderer. Like *Swept Away*, the novel leaves open the possibility that she is actually a villainess rather than a heroine, and it is in *The Pit* that the truth is finally sorted out.

Beyond being a sequel to two previous novels, *The Pit* is also part of a traditional literary theme, that of a woman determined to take action to help herself in a society that is hostile to her endeavors. An early example is *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe (1722; often simply titled *Moll Flanders*), in which a woman tells of her often antisocial adventures in a patriarchal society that seems designed to prevent her from improving her lot in life. Her adventures are scandalous and are echoed in Jeanette's powerful sexual passions. Another example is *No Name* by Wilkie Collins (1862), a best-selling nineteenth-century English author. The main character is a woman denied her birthright by cruel English laws; she uses subterfuges such as disguises and often pretends to be someone she is not, ploys imitated by Jeanette. In fact, the darkness of *No Name*, as well as the protagonist's pluckiness and daring, are reminiscent of *The Pit*.

Traditionally, the women in such novels are pitted against a patriarchal society in which women have few legal rights. For instance, *Moll Flanders* cannot hold many jobs that men freely hold; matters were different in 1990s America, a time when the male stranglehold on the job market had given way to more openness to women.

Nevertheless, Jeanette still comes into conflict with a social barricade—the one between minors and many of the benefits of the law. Like Collins's heroine in *No Name*, Jeanette refuses to be limited in her search by social restrictions, pretending to be a grownup when she must and pressing forward using all of her cunning to uncover the truth.



# Copyright Information

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