



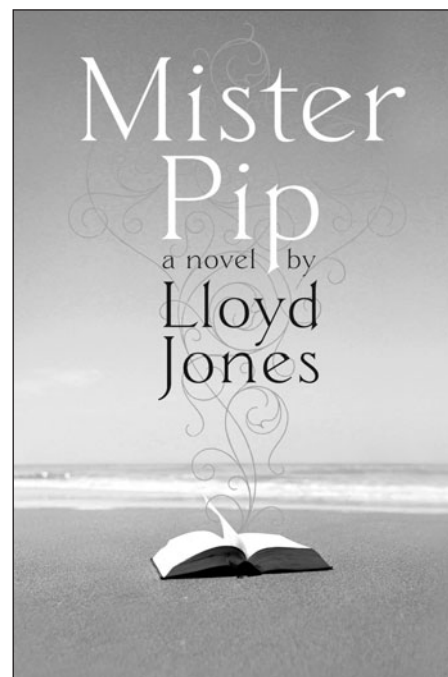
# Mister Pip

A Novel

Written by Lloyd Jones

Dial Press | Hardcover  
978-0-385-34106-6 | 272 pages | \$20.00 | Exam Copy: \$10.00

READING LEVEL: 9



## • note to teachers •

Acclaimed writer Lloyd Jones compellingly unites history and literature in this heartbreaking, thought-provoking novel. *Mister Pip's* young protagonist, Matilda, first encounters the wonders of literature against a tumultuous backdrop of social unrest. Examining the complicated political situation on the island on which Matilda lives through the personalities and experiences of its inhabitants, Jones deftly interweaves Matilda's attempts to understand and master a classic English novel, *Great Expectations*, with her struggles to understand the chaotic world around her. As the story unfolds, her inner life is transformed by this new knowledge just as surely as her everyday life is disrupted by tragedy. In *Mister Pip*, abstract questions about literary interpretation and critical thinking are placed in direct and meaningful dialogue with issues of ethics and personal identity: this is a novel that will challenge students to think in new ways about themselves and the texts they read.

## • about the book •

The heroine of *Mister Pip*, Matilda, is a bright and curious thirteen-year-old when the story opens on the South Pacific island of Bougainville, where she lives with her mother. The island has been blockaded, and the fabric of the villagers' lives is gradually shredding under the pressure of economic deprivation, isolation and violence, as local rebels fight against the blockaders for control of the island and its valuable copper mine. A new sort of order enters Matilda's bewildering days when Mr. Watts, the mysterious and eccentric neighbor who is now the only white man on her island, takes over the village's abandoned school and begins to read Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* to the children day by day. Entranced by the strangeness of the story and its new vocabulary, Matilda's imaginative life becomes deeply entwined with that of the characters. As the island is engulfed in catastrophes of increasingly terrible magnitude, Matilda, Mr. Watts, and the rest of the community turn again and again to Dickens' words not just to escape the reality of their everyday lives but to remember, change and share their own life stories. Ultimately, Mr. Watts and the memorable characters he brings to life shape Matilda's own destiny as she struggles to find her place in the world after leaving her island home.

*Mister Pip* contains occasional profanity and a scene of violence near the end of the novel; these events, seen and narrated from Matilda's perspective, serve to heighten the realism of her experience of war and emphasize the resiliency and strength of character which enable her near-miraculous escape from the island and her eventual maturation into an insightful and self-reliant adult.

## • about the writer

LLOYD JONES is the writer of many short stories and novels for adults and children, including *The Book of Fame* and *Biografi*, a *New York Times* Notable Book. He lives in Wellington, New Zealand.

## • teaching ideas

*Mister Pip*'s exploration of the transformative powers of literature amidst personal and political crisis provides teaching opportunities on a wide variety of topics. The novelty of Dickens—and of English literature itself—to Matilda and the other Bougainville students forces readers to explore and re-examine assumptions about reading and storytelling that are often taken for granted. The novel offers, therefore, numerous opportunities for classroom discussion about the importance and function of literature, the relationship between reader and text, the cultural or social expectations that may accompany certain types of reading and writing, and the ways in which literature can be reinterpreted—or misinterpreted. *Mister Pip* is a natural fit for literature courses of all kinds; its concern with historical conflict, racial issues and human rights, however, will also render it a valuable addition to Social Studies or History courses.

## • discussion and writing

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you learn about Mr. and Mrs. Pop Eye in the first few pages of the novel? What do you learn about the narrator?
2. Why do you think the narrator says that anyone who asked about the difference between a parasol and an umbrella would “get a hiding”? (3)
3. What does this sentence mean? “White stars and a full moon were more important when my grandfather grew up than they are now that we have generators” (4). Does it suggest or imply anything about the story to come?
4. At the end of the first chapter, the narrator remarks, “Our class was asked to write an essay on what we had seen, but I had no idea what it was about” (6). What have they seen? Do you know what it was about? Why don't you think the narrator knows?
5. Why aren't the islanders overly concerned about the blockade at first? What makes them change their minds? (9-10)
6. On his first day teaching at the school, Mr. Watts tells the students that he doesn't mind being called “Pop Eye.” Why does this prevent the narrator from calling him that name again? (17)
7. What do the children's parents want them to ask Mr. Dickens on the second day of school? Why do they think he can help? Why can't he? (19-20)
8. How long does Mr. Watts say it will take for the students to get to know Mr. Dickens? Why do you think he says that only “some” of them will know him by the end of that time? (22)
9. How does the narrator feel about Mr. Dickens' story after hearing the first chapter? What parts does she like most? Which are difficult for her to understand, and why? (23-24)
10. How does Matilda's mother react when she learns that the class is reading *Great Expectations*? Why do you think she responds as she does? (26-27)

11. What reasons do you think Mr. Watts has for inviting the children's parents in to speak in the classroom?
12. Why is the phrase "a rimy morning" difficult for Matilda and the others to understand? What effect does the phrase have on Matilda's mother? (33-35)
13. When the helicopters fly over the village on page 36, who is there? What does Matilda mean when she says that the "dogs and chickens that had names" evacuated along with the people?
14. What happens in the village when the helicopters land? (39-40)
15. Why does Matilda's mother look angry when she's thinking? What does Matilda imagine she's thinking about? What else might she be thinking of? (42)
16. Why do you think Matilda says that she will have to choose between Mr. Watts and her mother? (47)
17. What does Matilda's mother mean when she says that Mr. Watts "is the offspring of a shining cuckoo"? Why does she call him "Pop Eye" instead of "Mr. Watts," as the children do? (48)
18. Why do you think Mr. Watts gets "testy" when the students ask whether a poor person can be a gentleman? (53)
19. Why does Matilda decide that her mother has more in common with Miss Havisham than with Pip's sister? (56-57)
20. When Matilda and Mr. Watts discuss his injured toenail on the beach, why does Matilda think that this is her "opportunity to ask if he missed the white world"? (69)
21. What aspects of Pip's new life bother Matilda in pages 70-71? How does Mr. Watts explain Pip's actions?
22. What do you think Mr. Watts means when he says that he hoped his wife "might eventually grow into her name"? (73)
23. According to Matilda's mother, what are braids good for? How do the children respond to her story? (79-80)
24. Why is Matilda afraid to have her friend's wounded brother Sam in the village? What do you think happens to Sam at the end of the chapter? (82)
25. Why does Matilda's mother tell the kids the story about the devil? Why does she look at Mr. Watts after she finishes? (86-89)
26. Why does Daniel look in Matilda's direction when he asks Mr. Watts what it's like to be white? (93) How does Daniel say it feels to be black? (94)
27. Why does the officer think that the villagers are hiding someone named Pip? Why is this an important question? (96)
28. Why does Mr. Watts tell the soldier that he is Mr. Dickens? What does Matilda mean when she says that his lie showed how much trust he placed in the children? (99)
29. Why is Daniel's mistake so disastrous for the villagers? Why do they blame Mr. Watts?
30. Where does Matilda find the missing copy of *Great Expectations*? What is the significance of her discovery? (108-09)
31. What does Matilda believe Mr. Watts means when he compares himself to a mammoth? (112)
32. Do any buildings remain after the second fire in the village? Which ones? Why? (121-22)
33. What does Matilda first remember about *Great Expectations*? What does Celia remember? (127-28)
34. How do the villagers respond to Mrs. Watts' death? Did hearing about her past change your perceptions of her? (140-45)

## • discussion and writing (continued)

35. How does the character of Mr. Jagers affect Matilda's memories of her father? (150-51)
36. Why are the villagers afraid of the rambos, even though they are "our boys"? (157)
37. The villagers and the rambos listen to Mr. Watts tell his life story for many different reasons. What are they?
38. Why do you think Mr. Watts doesn't want Matilda to tell her mother about the boat that could take them away from the island? (176)
39. Why is Mr. Watts' phrase "spare room" so difficult for Matilda to translate for the other villagers? (179)
40. What is the significance of the lists that Mr. Watts and Grace write on their walls? Where do the ideas in the lists come from? (184-92)
41. Why does Matilda call the "Mayfly Story" Mr. Watts' gift to her mother? (192)
42. Did Mr. Watts' story and Matilda's mother's explanation affect your understanding of Mrs. Watts' name change? (196-97)
43. Why does Matilda's mother tell the redskins that she witnessed Mr. Watts' death? (205)
44. What makes Matilda decide that she wants to survive after the terrible tragedies? Why does she call the log she clings to in the flood "Mr. Jagers"? (215-16)
45. When Matilda reads *Great Expectations* in her new school library, what does she discover? Why do you think Mr. Watts made the changes to the book he did? (224-26)
46. What role does *Great Expectations* play in Matilda's adult life?
47. At the end of the novel, why do you think Matilda wants to find out about Mr. Watts' former life? What does she discover? Do her findings change how she feels about Mr. Watts? Do they change your own feelings about him?

## WRITING PROMPTS

1. When Mr. Watts tells the students they are going to be introduced to someone called Mr. Dickens, they all assume they will be meeting a real person. How is reading a writer's book different from meeting the writer himself? How are the two kinds of meetings similar? In a short essay, explain your thoughts on this topic; if you wish, you may use examples from a book you have read recently to illustrate your point.
2. On page 24, the writer says, "That happened years earlier when the mine was still open and there were white people crawling over Panguna like ants over a corpse." What is the name of the rhetorical device used in this sentence? What is its effect? Why do you think the narrator chooses this particular phrase to describe the state of the island at that time? Find another such comparison in this chapter and explain its function. Be sure to consider the tone, meaning and significance of your chosen sentence.

3. When Gilbert Masoi's mother visits the classroom, he is embarrassed by the things she says to the class. Why? Have you ever been embarrassed by someone in your family? Write a brief essay describing a real or imaginary example of such an encounter in your past. How was your own discomfort like Gilbert's? How was it different? How do you think your family member felt about the event? How does Gilbert's mother feel?
4. When Matilda's mother visits the class at the beach, she says: "Stories have a job to do. They can't just lie around like lazybone dogs. They have to teach you something" (86). Do you agree with this statement? Explain your point of view in a persuasive essay, using examples from books or stories you've read.
5. When Mr. Watts finishes reading *Great Expectations* to the class, they're so glum that he decides they'll read it again, this time with the students taking turns reading. But Matilda doesn't find this a satisfying solution, because, she thinks, "nothing would change for our reading it a second time. [...] Reading it a second or third or fourth time, as we did, would not change those events" (77). Have you ever read a book more than once? Was the experience of a subsequent reading different than the first? Write an essay in which you agree or disagree with Matilda's assessment of re-reading. Can a reader's response to a story change even if the story itself does not?
6. When Matilda finds Mr. Watts' missing copy of *Great Expectations*, she doesn't return it to him. Why not? Discuss her moral dilemma in terms of her loyalty to Mr. Watts and to her mother. Is her choice correct, in your opinion? What factors must she consider in making her decision?
7. After the redskins burn the villagers' belongings, Matilda realizes that: "My mum's silence meant that while Mr. Watts' copy of *Great Expectations* was saved, her beloved pidgin Bible went on the bonfire" (111). If you could only own one book or item, which would you choose, and why?
8. Matilda frequently compares characters or scenes from *Great Expectations* with scenes from her own life. Choose one example of such a comparison and explain how the novel sheds light on her real-life experiences, or vice versa. Questions you may wish to consider include: Are Matilda's comparisons accurate? How do they show understanding (or misunderstanding) of a particular situation? Did her comparison change your own understanding of the person or situation she described?
9. When Matilda reads *Great Expectations* herself for the first time, she realizes: "Mr. Watts had read a different version to us kids. A simpler version. He'd stuck to the bare bones of *Great Expectations*, and he'd straightened out sentences, ad-libbed in fact, to help us arrive at a more definite place in our heads" (225). Do you think Mr. Watts' changes were justified? Should he have told the children that the story they were hearing differed from the original? Discuss his actions, considering both Matilda's original attachment to the novel and her reaction to this discovery.
10. When Matilda learns that Mr. Watts used to be an actor, she wonders whether the behaviors she saw in the classroom were really Mr. Watts "or an actor playing Mr. Watts the schoolteacher" (244). Is there a difference between these two options? Does it matter? Argue your point of view in an essay, using examples from the text.

## • suggested activities

1. With your students, re-read pages 123 through 132, in which Mr. Watts and the children begin to reconstruct *Great Expectations* from memory. Divide the class into small groups, with one or two students as the assigned writers for each group. Choose a book or story that the class has read together earlier in the semester or school year, and ask each group to try to reconstruct the book by recording the fragments that the group members remember. After the students have worked for a set amount of time (perhaps 15-30 minutes; make sure that every student has had the chance to contribute at least one fragment to his/her group), have each group share their reconstructed story with the rest of the class. Ask the students: Are their reconstructions alike? Different? How do they differ from the original? Consider how the reconstructed stories would change if they worked on them for a longer period of time. Is time the only limiting factor? Can such a reconstruction ever be “better” than the original work? As good?
2. In *Mister Pip*, Mr. Watts invites the children’s parents into the classroom to share their knowledge with the students, though their lessons are very different from his own. Ask your students to consider what knowledge or experiences *they* have that other people may not, and have them design a brief lesson in which they will present their knowledge to their classmates. Possible topics might include a place they have visited, a book they have read, or a skill they have learned. Remind students that their lessons should be concise and informative: they may wish to use note cards or audiovisual aids, if appropriate, to help with their explanation. Allow time for questions and answers after each presentation. After all of the students have presented to the class, discuss the experience with the class. How were these “lessons” different from their usual lessons? Were the topics different? The presentation style? Did the exercise change their feelings about the parents’ lessons in the novel?

## • vocabulary

**constabulary**, *n.* – the force of policemen and officers in a district.

**emigrant**, *n.* – a person who emigrates, as from his or her native country or region.

**hiding**, *n. informal.* – a beating, thrashing.

**Pidgin**, *n.* – an auxiliary language that has come into existence through the attempts by the speakers of two different languages to communicate and that is primarily a simplified form of one of the languages, with a reduced vocabulary and grammatical structure and considerable variation in pronunciation.

**rambo**, *n.* – a fanatically militant or violently aggressive person.

**rimy**, *adj.* – frosty; covered with frost or a coating of ice.

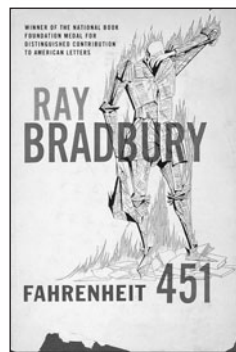
**serialized**, *adj.* – written or published in short installments at regular intervals, as a novel appearing in successive issues of a magazine.

\*Definitions above are taken or adapted from *Dictionary.com*, a compilation of online dictionaries.

## • beyond the book

1. *Mister Pip* is a story of lives which are profoundly affected by political and historical events, yet many of these events are often related only in bits and pieces, as part of the narrator's memories. Ask your students to research the political and historical situation in Bougainville in the years around 1990, the time in which this novel is set. You may wish to assign individual dates or topics to different students, and then have each student share his/her findings with the class. Ask the class: How does your experience of the events from this novel differ from your experience of them during your research? Why might the writer have chosen to present the story in this way? How does this relate to his choice of narrator?
2. Names—real names, false names, changing names, mistaken names—are very important in *Mister Pip*. Have each of your students choose a subject who uses or has used more than one name. Possibilities include: family members or ancestors who have changed their name; celebrities who use a professional or stage name; writers who write under a pseudonym; acquaintances who go by a nickname or middle name; even book or movie characters. Students may wish to interview or research their subjects, in cases where this is possible. Each student should consider why his/her subject uses the name he/she does and what the possible effects of using a different name might be. Ask each student to sum up his or her findings visually in a poster format: a flow chart, family tree, or collage may be effective ways to convey the significance(s) of the name-change and of each name itself.

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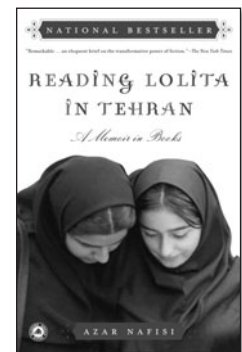
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## • about this guide

HANNAH DOHERTY is a Ph.D. student in English Literature at Stanford University, where she will spend the next few years taking many English classes, working as a graduate teaching assistant and teaching as an instructor in Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric. She is an avid reader and has worked with young people of all ages as a tutor and camp counselor.

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