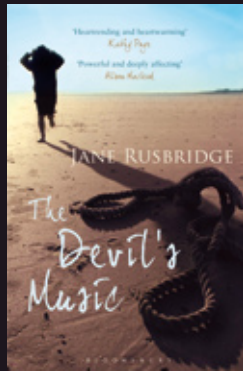


ABOUT THE BOOK

It is 1958 and the Sputnik satellite has taken a dog up into space; back on earth, five-year-old Andy has a new sister, Elaine – a baby who, his father insists, is ‘not quite all there’. While his parents argue over whether or not to send Elaine away, Andy sleeps beside her cot each night, keeping guard and watching as his mother – once an ambitious, energetic nurse – twists away into her private, suffocating sadness.



*'I hold my breath and close my eyes.
Grampy tells me about the Lapland
witches who tied wind knots to sail by.
Whistling is the Devil's music.
It might make a storm come.'*

Knots keep treasures safe, Andy's rope-maker grandfather tells him, and, as he listens to stories of the great Harry Houdini, Andy learns the Carrick Bend, the Midshipman's Hitch and the Monkey's Fist. Then a young painter, hired to decorate the family's house, seems to call Andy's mother back from the grief in which she is lost. But one day, at The Siding – the old railway carriage that serves as the family's seaside retreat – Andy is left in charge of his baby sister on a wind-chopped beach, where he discovers that not all treasures can be kept safe for ever.

Three decades later Andrew returns from self-imposed exile to The Siding, the place where his life first unravelled. Looking back on the broken strands of his childhood, he tries, at last, to weave them together, aided by his grandfather's copy of The Ashley Book of Knots and the arrival of a wild-haired, tango-dancing sculptor – a woman with her own ideas about making peace with the past.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jane Rusbridge lives on the coast in West Sussex with her husband, a farmer, and three of their five children. She taught at primary and preschool levels before returning to education herself as a mature student to study English at Chichester University, where she went on to gain an MA in Creative Writing. For the past ten years she has worked at Chichester University as an Associate Lecturer in English.

B L O O M S B U R Y

READING GROUP GUIDE

A haunting, lyrical story of love, betrayal, and family secrets buried in the shifting landscape of memory.



The
Devil's
Music

B L O O M S B U R Y

DISCUSSION

1. Three narrative strands run throughout *The Devil's Music* – Andy, the child's, Andrew, the man's and Helen, his mother's, viewpoint. Do you find the voices in each strand are different? If so, in what ways are they distinct from each other?

2. Each chapter of the novel is headed with one of three knots.



The names and descriptions of these knots can be found in the glossary of knots at the beginning of the novel. Why do you think the characters are represented with knots, rather than using their names as chapter headings? In what ways, for you, do the knots symbolise certain qualities of the characters they represent?

3. Andrew's viewpoint was the most complicated of the three to write. What could be the reason – because he is an adult man, or because of his individual character traits? Why might it have been a challenge to get inside his head?

4. Much of the story is set in late 1950s/early 60s. What does this choice of era bring to the novel? The novel does not follow a traditional linear progression but shifts in time between the late 50s/early 60s and the 90s. What could be the reasons for using this technique to tell a story which stretches over a time span of about forty years? Are there any clues which guide the reader through the switches in time?

5. In what ways do the form and structure/shape of the novel echo its content and subject matter?

6. 'She soon learned it was easier not to tell people, easier not to feel their incredulity, their cooling towards her.' (page 305)

Do you feel sympathetic towards Helen as a character? Is Helen a good or a bad mother? She faces a difficult dilemma – does she have good enough reasons for her final choice?

7. Andrew and Sarah live unconventional lives. Are they missing something, searching for something, or are they being true to themselves?

8. Andy and Helen have a difficult relationship with Michael, but how does the novel portray him? Are there any scenes or revelations which soften his character? Do you find him domineering or sympathetic?

9. How important is the landscape, particularly the seascape, in the novel? What, if anything, does the descriptive detail add to your experience as a reader?

10. '(...) I'm comfortable and not sleepy yet so I experiment with a beginning. "Many years ago there was a small boy who loved this beach—", and my memory of that terrible day becomes the story of Elaine.' (page 175) What does the novel suggest about the influence and fallibility of memory? How significant is the past to Andrew's character? Why do you think both past memories and present events are written about in the present tense? What effects does the tense of the narrative have on you as a reader?

11. 'You are empty, brittle as a shell, the blood in your ears the sea's ghost. The clock ticks; your lungs rise and fall.'

In this novel, the mother's story is told almost entirely in the second person (you). Why do you think this point of view has been chosen by the author? What is its effect on you as a reader? What are the possible reasons for switching to the third person (he/she) in the postscript?

12. Did you find the end satisfying? Were there questions still left unanswered?

Further Reading

The Outcast by Sadie Jones
Music and Silence by Rose Tremain
Postcards by Annie Proulx