

# GONE

## Teachers Notes on *Gone* by Michael Grant

Fourteen-year-old Sam Temple is sitting in a history class when, suddenly and without warning, his teacher disappears. Disbelief is quickly replaced by fear when it becomes apparent that everyone aged fifteen and over, not only in the school, but in the entire town of Perdido Beach, has disappeared instantaneously – parents, siblings, friends, those in authority. Radio, television, mobile phones, computer networks no longer work. There are no doctors or emergency services, indeed no adults at all, to provide the services and supports that are taken for granted. An impermeable barrier surrounds the town and seals it off from the rest of the world.. How will those under fifteen deal with this situation?

Because of a past heroic deed, Sam Temple is immediately seen by many kids as being the one who should take responsibility and leadership. But he is reluctant, for reasons he keeps to himself, and the brutal bullies, Orc and Howard, have their own ideas about who should be in charge. But it's when the crew from the private boarding school, Coates Academy, comes to town, that it becomes a far more sinister and frightening game of power.

In an urban Lord of the Flies, Grant combines elements of science fiction, horror, thriller and adolescent coming-of-age genres in a rich mix that makes for gripping, suspenseful reading. Also at the heart of the novel are large moral questions about the choices we make to live our lives, and readers will find themselves considering what their reactions would be in a similar situation.





### Sharing with students

This is a tightly plotted novel with many twists and turns. It is written from multiple viewpoints. It would be best read progressively (ideally aloud) with pauses at strategic moments in the plot for prediction, reaction, and discussion.

### Before reading

The premise of this gripping page-turner is a fascinating one that will make for much speculative discussion among readers. One approach might be to propose the central idea of the novel for discussion as an introduction to the book – the essential ‘what if?’ of the narrative.

What would you do if everyone in your town/suburb/city over the age of fifteen disappeared? This could be further broken down to the long term and the short term. Use the time span that the book covers (roughly twelve days). What the students come up with could then be measured against what happens in the plot – are any reactions the same?



### During Reading

#### *Setting*

The setting, size and placement of the town are central to the events of the book.

Maps are provided at the end of the book, but the text fills in much more detail, and features change during the progress of the story. The maps could be scanned and enlarged and the detail from the book added in, or students could create their imagined setting from the detail provided. For example:

- Consider the time of year/season – November. (Northern hemisphere)
- The images could record how the town changes (such as on p46 – burned building, family groups, making pup tents in the plaza, p228, p556 after the battle between Sam and Caine's forces) and students could talk about how the setting acts symbolically in the narrative.
- At the end of the novel they could visually predict how Sam and his crew will revive the town.

#### *Characters*

While this primarily a plot-driven narrative, individual characters have very different reactions to what has happened and are given time to develop and change throughout the novel – not always for the better!

- Develop character profiles (with images – these could change as the story develops) on a wiki. This could be a class wiki, small group, partner, or individual.
- Students could also construct a character map charting how relationships between characters, as well as individual significance, change over the course of the novel.
- Students could also think about the significance of names. David Lodge in *The Art of Fiction* reminds us that names always signify something, even if it is ordinariness. Consider meanings of and associations we make with names such as Orc (a mythical monster, an ogre – is that what Orc is mutating into?); Astrid (fair, beautiful, name of one of the Valkyries); Sam (Samuel was a Biblical prophet); Caine (Biblical Cain kills his brother Abel); Diana (the huntress of Greek mythology); Drake (like Draco Malfoy?) Arwen (created by Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings*) etc.



### *Characters - Perdido Beach*

#### **Sam Temple**

Much of the narrative comes through Sam – what happens to him, what he thinks, his decisions, his relationships, his behaviour and what others say about him. Below are some examples, but students can be encouraged to identify what they think is important about Sam. Would they support him? Like him? Be his friend? Fancy him?

- p5 Sam is a surfer, bright, good looking. His mother works as night nurse at Coates Academy, a private boarding school for difficult students. Sam has only days before he turns fifteen.
- He is known as 'School Bus Sam'. When he was in year seven he saved a bus from crashing after the driver had a heart attack.
- p35 a fire breaks out and Sam takes initiative and leadership.
- p47 Sam is assumed as leader, but he is most reluctant. Discuss why – is it his awareness of the destructive nature of his power, or does he lack a sense of responsibility?
- p71 Astrid says, 'You go along in your life just sort of living. And then something goes wrong and there you are. You step up and do what you have to do.' Do you agree with her?
- Is that how Sam sees himself? E.g. on p96 he is glad that Orc is organising things – he 'didn't want to do it himself'.
- p97 Howard accuses him of self-interest and being 'too good for everyone'. Is that fair/right? Later, Caine says Sam just wants to be the hero. Is that what motivates him?
- p108 he has a strong sense of morality, such as when he considers taking guns to fight against Orc, and is then unhappy with himself for considering it.
- p236 Astrid again, 'She believed in him. She knew he had a destiny.'
- p323 Astrid says Sam's power is generated by anger. What does this tell us about him? Is there such a thing as 'righteous anger'?



### ***Characters - Perdido Beach continued***

#### **Quinn Gaither**

Quinn is one of the most equivocal characters and it is not always easy to guess which way he will go.

- Sam's supposed best friend, or his 'only friend,' as he likes to remind Sam.
- p5 has a description of how he dresses. Sam says he puts out a 'weird-guy vibe'.
- From the beginning, Quinn shows signs that he is not coping with what has happened. He is short, rude (p83–84) and condescending to Edilio. Is he classist and racist?
- p104 his resentment of Sam and Edilio builds, and he becomes increasingly cynical towards and mocking of Sam, Astrid and Edilio (p111, 176, 214).
- Astrid says he is not strong or brave, unlike Sam. Do you agree?
- On p243 he behaves as a Judas character, betraying Sam to Caine. But then on p262, he rescues Sam. This suggests that Quinn has a conscience but is weak as Astrid says.
- p404 again he sides with Drake. Is it fair to say by the end of the book he has found courage and integrity (p521)?

#### **Astrid Ellison**

Astrid plays a central role in supporting Sam and giving him confidence, as well as becoming his love interest.

- She is a genius at school, beautiful and longed for by Sam. She seems to work Sam out quickly, and likes to send him up (e.g. p85 for 'male posturing').
- There is a revealing moment when they find Petey (p111) and Astrid registers disappointment. Does this make you like her more or less, that she finds her brother a burden to look after?
- Although at times Astrid feels resentful of having to look after Pete, when her fear of Drake causes her to betray him by calling him a retard, she experiences profound and on going remorse and disgust at her actions.



### *Characters - Perdido Beach continued*

#### **Pete (Often called Little Pete or Petey)**

The crucial part Pete has played in the cause of the FAYZ is revealed in the narrative. Towards the end of the book, there is a suggestion that the knock on the head may have changed Pete. Predict what you think his role will be in the sequel.

- Pete is Astrid's four-year-old severely autistic brother.

#### **Edilio Escobar**

- Edilio is one of the most consistent characters in the story. He is a new kid at the school and comes from Honduras.

- He is resourceful, brave and independent but happy to be part of a group.
- He acts early on (p36–37) to support Sam and maintains this position throughout the novel.

#### **Mary Terrafino**

- Mary is valiant and responsible, caring for the little kids under increasingly difficult circumstances.

- She shows courage in protecting the children from the attack by the coyotes.
- p119 her Achilles heel is bulimia and she relies on Prozac to get her through.

#### **Orc**

Orc undergoes major psychological and physical change (mutation) during the novel, especially after his actions result in the death of Bette.

- p7 he is described as 'a glowering thug of an eighth-grader, a mountain of fat and muscle who scared even ninth-graders.'
- p37 he is quick to establish himself as Sam's enemy.
- p47 he and his gang set themselves up in the street and amass sinister weapons,
- p51 he begins to drink alcohol and this becomes an increasing problem for him.
- he came from a tough background and morphs into a grotesque creature that he accepts as his punishment for killing Bette. Talk about predictions for him in the next novel.



### ***Characters - Perdido Beach continued***

#### **Howard**

- p7 Howard is 'Orc's number one toady' and also a good spin doctor (p96).
- By his own admission he had a loving family, but being small, weak and unpopular has made him attach himself to those who can give him power.
- Would you agree that he is a bully and a coward, but not as inherently evil as Caine or Drake?

#### **Lana Arwen Lazar**

- p19 we are told that Lana's grandfather is Chumash Indian
- She has been sent to stay with him because she has been defying her parents.
- She is resilient and tough – (p23 she gets out of the car even with horrible injuries).
- She has the power of healing.

#### **Albert Hillsborough**

- p60 onwards detail his choices and what the emergency offers him. Being the youngest in his family, has lost all of them, but he survives by setting himself a valuable task.
- Albert sees the value of work. He is not a leader but has considerable practical and organizational skills. Do you think we will see a bigger role for him in the next book?





### **Characters - Coates Academy**

#### **Caine Soren**

Caine initially seems a natural, benign leader, but

- p140–141 Astrid has his measure. Why is she so cynical about him? Are you?
- p142 Sam distrusts 'rehearsed displays' and 'charm'. Why is that? Do you?
- p147 Caine is clever, sneaky.
- p247 he has the most power and uses it to control and hurt people.
- He becomes increasingly out of control and megalomaniacal, for instance when he orders Drake to kill Astrid and Pete (p252).
- p253 Sam says he is mad. Do you agree? Can madness be an excuse for his actions?
- p509 he admits he is all about absolute power. Do you understand him?

#### **Diana Ladris**

- Diana is beautiful.
- She is cynical about Caine and seems to have her own agenda.
- She can read people's powers.
- At end of the first book, she elects to go with Caine even though Astrid makes an offer for her to stay. Diana says, 'The bad girl ends up with the bad boy. It's the way the world works.' (p552). Is this rationalisation, or does she have feelings for Caine? What is her motivation for staying with him?

#### **Computer Jack**

- Jack is a twelve-year-old, technical prodigy who is sent to Coates as a smart, difficult child.
- His love of technology gets in the way of his ethics and morals.
- p157 Astrid suggests to Jack that people use him. Is he amoral?
- Can he be seen as the classic boffin who is so focused on solving scientific/technical problems that he doesn't see, or care about, the consequences?
- p555 the last we hear of him is his setting up of the music for the Thanksgiving dinner, so it appears he has joined Sam's group.





### During Reading

After having the class suggest what they would do if all people over fifteen disappeared, then track the reactions as you read. Some examples are below but students will like to identify ones of interest to them.

#### *Reactions to /theories about the cause of the FAYZ*

- p9 the young ones want to raid the vending machine.
- p12–13 Sam feels responsible for the little ones who don't even know their way home.
- p15–16 Quinn's disbelief and searching for an explanation. On p28 he thinks they have done something to deserve it.
- Sam doesn't think it was God.
- Astrid looks at it scientifically and says it goes against all laws of nature.
- p28, 55 practical details such as stoves left on, dogs and babies etc.
- p45 the store is looted – for chocolate bars and soft drinks.
- p74–79 Mary and her brother John (who is only nine years old) look after the little ones in the day care centre.
- p123 Edilio wonders whether radiation has caused the FAYZ.
- Astrid says radiation can cause mutations such as the frightening cat on p200–201.



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### Ideas to discuss

As well as being a gripping page-turner, *Gone* raises large moral and ethical questions that beg to be talked about. Again, students should be invited to select their own but some starting points are below.

- p11 Sam thinks, 'Scared people did scary things sometimes, even kids...fear could be dangerous'
- p50 Astrid quotes Roosevelt: 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself'. Use as a basis for discussing events in the novel, and generally.
- p61 McDonalds to the rescue – descriptions of the food. This is an interesting positioning of the fast food giant in the fate of the FAYZ and worth talking about.
- p134–135 here is an opportunity for the science buffs to explore the laws of physics, and for others to extend their repertoire of knowledge (which is one of the reasons we read). Find out about Einstein, Heisenberg, Feynman and theories of relativity, quantum mechanics, the uncertainty principle etc.
- Astrid suggests someone has hacked the universe and rewritten the software. Is this a good analogy? Imagine (write/act) some other scenarios based on this idea.
- p179–181 Sam reads Caine's rules and points out the implications, such as members of society being informers (cf. Stasi), suppression of free speech, ultimate power to the sheriff. This could be a point to discuss totalitarian societies and/or why the rule of law is central to our society. Students could also make up their own rules for a just and free society. Is it hard to reach agreement?
- p183 Edilio says people will want to find scapegoats and Quinn says we play by the bully rules now that adults aren't around. Do you think that is inevitable? Could Sam have acted earlier to prevent it?
- p199 Albert reads an encyclopedia to find out about the value of work, and likens reading it to 'following hyperlinks only slower'. Is that what reading a book has/will become?
- Albert also comes across the ideas of Karl Marx and Adam Smit, which provides more opportunities for expanding knowledge repertoire for those who are interested.
- p261 Howard suggests that the current position the FAYZ finds itself in is Sam's fault because he chose not to lead. Do you agree?
- p344–345 Astrid talks about the theory of multiple universes – research, discuss



### Ideas to discuss continued

- p350 Albert understands that they are consuming, not producing, and that resources are finite. He thinks that people will eventually fight over food. Is he being pessimistic, predictive?
- p469 Edilio doesn't have supernatural powers but he does have 'the power to earn trust and to come through when he has to,' says Astrid. Which are the greater powers? Why?
- p445 deals with discovering how it all happened. Little Pete caused the FAYZ but stopped a nuclear meltdown. Is he a force for good? Is he perhaps a new type of human being? What motivates him?
- p447 focuses on the central question – who or what is generating the power and deciding how it will be used? The Darkness has the power but what is its purpose? What is the Darkness? Discuss and put on the class wiki before *Hunger* is read.

### Moral choices

- p192-194 Edilio says they can't let the death of Bette go unpunished: 'People can't be beating each other up so bad they die'. But Sam resists, believing he lacks a moral core. (Is this like Biblical incident of 'He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone?') What do you think? Is Sam vulnerable to the 'power corrupts' eventuality, or does his resistance suggest a moral core?
- p255 Astrid says to Diana '...usually a person who does bad things recognizes that there's something a little wrong with them...they know they're sick inside.' Do you think this is true of Drake, Caine and Diana? What about Orc?
- p554 Did Sam win? Is it a 'hollow victory'? Consider the final line of the book, 'Got a lot of holes to dig'. Was the cost of 'winning' too great? Could you have proposed a solution that didn't involve violence or killing?



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### Plot

Grant uses the literary technique of foreshadowing to keep readers involved in the text. As predicting what might happen and working out puzzles in the text is what readers do, these moments of foreshadowing provide rich opportunities for discussion. Below are some examples; readers might like to find others.

- p11 Sam hopes he is not the cause of what has happened. Why would he think this? What might he have done?
- p19 'This was all crazy. But for Sam, the crazy had started long before.' What do you think is going on with Sam? Also on p27 there is something in his house he doesn't want the others to see. What might that be?
- p52–53 confrontation beginning with Orc's group – a sense of threat and sinister foreshadowing.
- p213 the dead child in the house and Brooke making a comment about it being like what happened at Coates. What do you think has gone/is going on at Coates?

### Suspense and problem solving

Grant uses cliffhangers and plot puzzles to great effect. They provide valuable points for stopping to consider what might be coming next.

- For example, on p24 Lana is left in the hot sun with vultures circling. Find other examples of cliffhangers in *Gone* and in other texts viewed or read (such as the television program *Doctor Who*). Are they hard to write?
- A class blog or wiki could be set up with students putting in their predictions as the story is progressively read, such as in regard to Sam's mother's cryptic diary message. Who are 'G', 'C'. What did Sam do to 'T'? (p32).
- p72–73 We are given more pieces of the puzzle. Pause here for more predictions. Who or what has caused it? How will we find out? What is going to happen? How Albert and Lana fit into the narrative?
- p105 the FAYZ – is it do with the Nuclear Power Plant?
- p115 what about the connection between the map and the FAYZ barrier? What does this suggest? Why does Astrid look guilty?
- p143 why does Caine look triumphant when Sam is nominated as a leader?



### Suspense and problem solving continued

- p145 Diana recognizes something in Sam. What is it?
- p145 why does Caine hold his meeting in the church? Significance? You might also consider here all the references to religion and belief in the novel.
- p158 Diana is threatening to Astrid, but deceptive to Caine (p161). What is her game?
- p338 what is Diana planning?
- p425 what is Sam's plan?
- p453 what sort of arm is Drake given?
- p515 Sam says he has a plan and has half an hour to make it work. Use what you know about the situation to work out how Sam might save them. Compare versions before you read on.

### Mode of telling

- The book begins with the countdown of hours, and at first we don't know what those hours refer to. Does this add to the suspense – time running out? What is the author's purpose in doing this and what is the effect on the reader?
- Grant also alternates the perspective from which the story is told. Look at when the changes occur – sometimes within chapters, sometimes at the beginning of chapters. Why has he chosen to do this? Look at when and why the changes happen and what the effect is on events as well as on the reader. E.g. p19 the jump to Lana; p59 the shift to Albert; p64 back to Lana; p74 Mary and John looking after the little ones in the Day Care centre; chapter fourteen when the Coates students come to town and establish their authority.
- Do you agree that these changes both heighten and relieve the tension?



## Teachers Notes on *Gone* by Michael Grant

### Graphic Writing

This novel has many fine examples of fast, furious, descriptive writing that will have readers on the edge of their seats. Invite students to identify favourite examples. Below are some examples which can be used to inspire student writing.

- p21–22 Lana in the car crash; p38–42 when Sam goes into the burning building. Look at the effective use of simile in the descriptions. Have students enliven their writing by using inventive (not clichéd!) similes.
- Look at the shortening of sentences to pick up the pace.
- p89 use of powerful, association: 'graveyard silence'.
- See p296–305 the boat chase; p364–365 Sam's encounter with the coyote at Lana's hut, for exciting action sequences. Examine the techniques used.
- p402–404 powerful visual and emotional moments such as the description of children with their hands encased in concrete. Look at how simple and matter-of-fact the language is, which serves to intensify the horror: there is no need for exaggeration; the simple facts are horrific enough.
- p420–423 cutting off Drake's arm.
- p535 The final showdown and Caine's awful power. The horror of it all: battles on all fronts; the chaos of war; the suffering of innocents. Make connections here between students' knowledge of other battles read about or seen (perhaps *Saving Private Ryan*, *Apocalypse Now* etc). Discuss the additional horror of these being young people, not adults.

### Genre

- Horror genre aficionados might like to identify the motifs that Grant uses so sparsely yet effectively. These include things such as the vultures that hover around Lana; the wolf-sized coyotes that whisper and threaten her; the snake that flies; the cat that Albert encounters in the library and the kids with their hands in concrete blocks to stop them using their power.
- You might also like to consider the utopia/dystopia possibilities for the next book. Look at Sam's speech on p559 and its inclusiveness, contrasted with Caine's journey to the Darkness.
- Will Perdido Beach become a utopia or dystopia? Write a chapter as either one or the other.



### Intertextual references

- Consider the purposes of intertextual references made in the text – such as establishing *Gone* as being in a particular tradition, homage to other texts/writers etc. such as p205 *War of the Worlds*; p216 *Stardust* movie; p288 Patrick O'Brian, Dan Simmons, Stephen King, Dennis Lehane, Henry Thoreau, *Oliver Twist*, *The Sea Wolf*, *The Big Sleep*, *Ivanhoe*, *Pride and Prejudice*; p376 *Lord of the Rings*.
- Look at the maps to see what other intertextual clues you can find in place/street names etc. You might have to use your knowledge of Spanish.

### Follow on

- *Gone* is such a visceral, sensual experience that an ideal activity for response would be for students in small groups to present a 3 minute movie trailer for the film version of *Gone* using iMovie, Moviemaker, Photostory etc. Or they might like to produce an animated version using Comic Life.
- They will need to consider the tone of the book and hence the movie, how to capture the suspense, choice of elements to highlight, appropriate music, text/voice over, images, cuts/edits, types of shots, pace, choice of characters etc.
- Have a movie trailer festival in which each group is given a brief time to talk about their trailer and then present it. Have voting for the best movie, like at Cannes/Sundance movie festivals, with students developing criteria for judging.

### Further Reading

Apart from following up on the books and films directly referred to in the texts, the following titles connect with *Gone*:

*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding  
*Doppelganger* by Michael Parker  
*The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness  
*Exodus* by Julie Bertagna  
*Obernewtyn Series* by Isobelle Carmody