



Little Island Books

**The Gone Book
by Helena Close**

Book Guide



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Synopsis

Note: This summary of the story is here just as a quick reference point. ***Don't read it before you read the book***, as reading it first will ruin your experience.

Matt is 15 and lives with his dad, his older brother Jamie and his younger brother Conor in a flat overlooking the river in Limerick city. His mother is no longer around, and they haven't heard from her in years. Ever since his mother left, Matt has been keeping a kind of diary of what he has been doing and how he has been feeling since his mother disappeared. He calls it his 'Gone Book'.

Matt's best friend is Mikey, who lives with his mother and brothers; his Chinese father lives locally and runs a Chinese takeaway. Mikey has a serious weight problem and tells terrible jokes. Matt's other good friend and possible love interest is Anna, whose Polish parents don't speak English.

The one thing that makes Matt feel good is skateboarding. He is really good at it and it takes him to a whole new place.

Other characters include Mikey's mother, Mrs Chung, who is the no-nonsense maternal heart of the book. She used to be friendly with Matt's mother, Lucy, but has no time for her since she abandoned her family; Matt's dad, a reformed alcoholic with an addiction now to running; Smart, a rich boy who is very sporty and skates and surfs very well; Hammer, a friend of Jamie's who is serious trouble; a homeless couple Hal and Blackie; a dog that goes by a variety of names.

The story opens with Matt and Mikey messing about. Mikey takes a fall and for an awful moment Matt thinks he is dead. To Mikey's great amusement. It is not so amusing when Jamie's friend Hammer turns up with some friends, who badly bully Mikey, including very blatant homophobic taunts and fat-shaming.

When Matt's mother turns up in town with a new boyfriend and a small daughter, Taylor, Matt is torn. He desperately wants to meet his mother,



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but he also wants to punish her. He and his brothers do get to meet her, and for most of the rest of the novel, Matt struggles with the longing to be loved by his mother and his anger at her for leaving them.

Mikey's mother takes a mobile home at Lahinch for a family holiday, and she invites Matt to join them. Matt is delighted to go. There is some tension between Matt and Mikey during the holidays, because Matt becomes friendly with Smart, who (like half of Limerick) is also in Lahinch on holidays. Smart introduces him to surfing. Matt is a natural at this sport, and adores it, and Mikey clearly feels left out.

Matt's mother turns up, renting a house with her new family very close to Mrs Chung's mobile home, and Conor and Jamie also arrive. Anna comes too, but just on a short visit, as her mother is very ill and she needs to get home. Matt and Anna finally get to kiss, and Matt likes it a lot.

In the evenings, the lads go drinking at the 'Cliff Bar' – not a real bar, just a drinking spot on the cliff. Hammer turns up and starts handing out pills. Matt is very suspicious, but Mikey takes a fistful of them, and then swims the bay in the dark and very nearly drowns. For the second time, Matt thinks Mikey is dead.

Matt's mother, eager to please him, buys him an expensive surfboard, which he is thrilled about. Jamie is jealous and puts pressure on his mother to give him money, since she has spent so much on Matt. She complies, and Jamie gets the impression she is wealthy.

Matt's fabulous new surfboard is stolen (from the shed outside his mother's holiday house) along with Matt's mother's fussy little dog. The dog turns up after a day or two, but there is no sign of the surfboard. Jamie's friend Hammer is the prime suspect.

Trying to be helpful, Mikey shops Hammer, but this causes havoc, as Hammer has broken the law in much more serious ways, and the police find and confiscate a stash of drugs in his car. Matt is furious with Mikey for bringing the cops into it, and won't talk to him.

Back in Limerick, Jamie is beaten up, presumably by drug dealers who control Hammer, because of the €3000 worth of drugs that were confiscated from Hammer by the police. Jamie is OK, but he still has to



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find €3000 or face more trouble. He tells Matt he's going to ask their mother for the money, as he believes she is loaded. He needs her address, as he wants to write her a letter, so Matt writes it on an envelope for him.

Skating down the street, Matt spots Smart, lying in a comatose state on drugs. Smart, semi-conscious, admits to Matt that it was he, Smart, who stole the surfboard, because he needed money. Mikey comes running to Matt, trying to make up with him, and Matt tells him it was Smart who stole the surfboard, not Hammer after all, so all Mikey did in shopping Hammer was bring the cops down on him and get the drugs confiscated for nothing, and now Jamie owes the drug barons €3000. Mikey, desperate to make friends again, follows Matt to where he is going – which is to see his mother, because he wants to have a final showdown with her about how she abandoned him as a child.

But when Matt arrives at his mother's house, he lands in on a tiger kidnapping. There are two men wearing novelty masks and armed with knives, and the mother's boyfriend is tied up.

Matt quickly realises that the men in masks are actually Jamie and Hammer – and it was Matt who gave Jamie their mother's address, so this is all his fault. He confronts Jamie, and their mother realises it is her own son who has come here with threats and violence. Furious with her, Jamie tells Matt that he caught their mother in bed with a schoolboy when he was still at school himself and that is why he hates her so much. Not only that, but his mother told Jamie he was not his father's son. (Which is not true.)

There is consternation when Mikey appears at the window. Hammer goes wild when he sees Mikey, because he knows he is the one who caused all the trouble with the police. There is a massive fight outside the house, and Hammer thumps Mikey so hard he falls on the flagstones and hits his head. Matt yells at Jamie to call an ambulance. But Mikey is badly hurt. After a few words with Matt, he dies. This time it is for real.

Matt is devastated, and misses his friend dreadfully. His mother has cleared off again. The only good thing to come out of it all is that Matt's father steps up, and Jamie is now getting on better with his family and is back at school and focused.



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Things start to look up for Matt too when Anna appears and takes him skateboarding.



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Before you read ...

Take a look at the front cover. Nice image? What does it make you think of or what kinds of feelings does it bring up for you?

Would you think this is quite a sophisticated cover? Would it make you think this is a book for adults or young readers or who? Can you work out why you think that?

What do you think about the title? Hard to know what it might be about, isn't it? Does that make you more interested in having a go at the book, or does it put you off? Why?

Opening pages

What do you make of the first sentence? Does it make you laugh? Would you think it gives you an indication of the kind of book this is going to be? For example, you probably get a strong impression that it's not going to be about anything very cuddly or polite, right? So what kind of story do you think this might turn out to be, and what kind of characters do you think you are likely to meet?

The kind of language that is used in this novel, right from the first sentence, is not everyone's cup of tea, but you'd have to agree that it is realistic for a story that is set in working-class Limerick among teenage boys around 2019. You might notice that a lot of the 'bad' words are in the dialogue: the author has written the things her young characters say to each other in the way they would actually speak.

Moving on, you can see that the first few pages of the book set the story up. You find out early on who the main character is, where he lives and what kind of place it is, what his family set-up is, who his friends are. A novel has to do that early in the story, so that the reader has enough information to make sense of what is going on, but the author has to do this in a way that draws the reader into the story and makes them want to keep reading.

If you've ever tried to write a story yourself, you'll probably know how difficult that is. The temptation is to just tell the reader, straight out, 'This



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is Matt and he's telling the story and he lives with his dad and his two brothers in a flat in Limerick. His dad is a recovering alcoholic with a major interest in sport and training; his mother has done a runner.' But that's not really all that interesting for the reader, is it? It's just a bunch of facts. It's far better if the writer can let all that information come out as the story is happening.

When you have read to the end of chapter 2, look back at the bit in the last paragraph here, where it says 'This is Matt ...' and so on, and see if you think it gives most of the important information.

It doesn't really, does it? There is loads of other information in these two chapters, about Matt's friends, for example, and about the kind of people they are.

A very good way to start a story (instead of with a whole lot of bald information) is with a dramatic event. Would you agree that Helena Close does that here, from the very first page – even, as we have seen, from the very first sentence? Would you agree that she draws you into the story and makes you want to read on, while she is also feeding you a whole lot of information about her characters?

By now you will have noticed that Matt is telling the story himself. He is a *first-person narrator* – meaning that, instead of the author telling us everything about what is happening to Matt (*Matt* did this, *he* thought that), it is as if Matt is talking directly to us, the readers (*I* did this, *I* thought that). Why do you think the author chose to write the story in this way? What advantages does a story get from being told in the first person like this? On the other hand, can you think of any disadvantages for the writer in telling the story in this way?

Writing exercise

Choose a paragraph from anywhere in the book and rewrite it in the third person – describing what Matt is doing and thinking and saying using 'he' instead of 'I'.

How do you think using the third person (he/she) to tell the story changes the impact it makes on the reader?



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The 'Gone Book'

From chapter 3 on, we get to know this 'Gone Book' that Matt keeps. It's a kind of diary, but it is really all about how he feels about his absent mother – how he misses her, how angry he is with her. That's why he calls it the 'Gone Book'—it's all about his mother being gone. (The title of the story starts to make sense now.)

As the novel progresses, the extracts we get to read from Matt's 'Gone Book' come closer and closer to the present. The first bit we read is when he is only ten, but by the time we get near the end of the book, we are reading things we already know about because they only happened very recently, since the point at which the novel opened.

Why do you think the author chose to include these 'Gone Book' extracts in the novel? Do you think that reading about Matt's feelings as he was growing up without his mother gives us any more insight into his thoughts and feelings than we can get from reading about what is happening right now?

Later in the novel the 'Gone Book' becomes part of the story itself, when Matt gives the book to his mother to read, to try to make her understand how he has missed her. But then he finds she hasn't even taken it out of the bag he gave it to her in. That's kind of typical of her.

When you've finished reading the book and know the full story, it might be interesting to read these 'Gone Book' extracts again, in sequence, without the chapters dealing with the present time. (They're short; it won't take long.) You'll probably find the 'Gone Book' narrative has a different effect on you when you read it all together like that, outside of the main story, so to speak. Why do you think that might be?

Writing exercise

Matt records various important events in his life – his confirmation, his grandfather's funeral – that his mother misses, and we get a sense of how hurt he is by her absence on those occasions.



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Think of another episode in Matt's life that his mother misses and have a go at writing the 'Gone Book' entry he might have written about it. Before you begin, decide what age he was at the time, because that will affect how he would have written at that stage of his life.

This writing exercise is not easy, but it's worth having a go at, if only so you can see how well Helena Close has done in writing the 10-year-old Matt, the 12-year-old Matt and so on.

Mothers and sons

At one point, Mrs Chung (the wise one in this story) says, 'It's complicated. People are complicated.' And that about sums up the whole story.

Conor was only five when his mother left, and he just misses her terribly and longs to be close to her again. Quite an uncomplicated relationship as far as his feelings go. Jamie, on the other hand, clearly hates his mother – not so much because she left, but because of the circumstances, which only become clear towards the end of the novel.

Matt is in the middle of the family, and his feelings about his mother are a bit like Conor's – very attracted by her, longing to be hugged and loved by her – and also a bit like Jamie's – very angry with her for abandoning him and not very trusting of her once she reappears.

At the beginning of the novel, Matt is very keen to make contact with his mother, but as soon as he hears she is back in Limerick, he starts to feel confused. Would you think that Matt's feelings about his mother are connected to all the other things that are going on in his life? How?

Then when he meets her, at first by chance in town, and later by arrangement with his father, Matt's feelings are more and more confused. Do you think that is realistic? At this stage of the story, you might be inclined to put his more negative feelings about his mother down to his distress at having been abandoned as a child, which is clear from the feelings he expresses in his 'Gone Book'.



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As the novel progresses, Matt's mother's character is revealed to be flawed and shallow. She is not all bad and her own feelings are clearly quite mixed too, but she is not able to meet Matt's very simple demand: 'I just want my mother to care.' Do you think that maybe some of Matt's confusion about how he feels about his mother might be down to his sense of her as not a very trustworthy person?

Friendship

Matt and Mikey

Apart from Matt's complicated feelings about his mother, the main emotional content of this novel is the friendship between Matt and Mikey.

See if you can pick out, say, five or six scenes where that friendship is especially closely examined, and see if you can work out how the author creates the sense of Matt and Mikey's friendship in the reader's mind.

Writing exercise

For each of the scenes you have identified, write:

- a single sentence to describe what happens in the scene
- a single word that describes the emotions of the boys at that point
- a single word to describe the emotional impact the scene had on you

It's OK to use the same word more than once in this exercise – but do try to vary it a bit, to do justice to how each scene works.

You'll notice that though the friendship is deep and loyal, it's not without its conflicts and tensions. Some of the confrontations between Mikey and Matt are really only slugging – a kind of expression of their closeness and their feelings for each other that looks like the opposite of what it is.

Find a run of dialogue anywhere in the text where Matt and Mikey are saying awful things to each other, but it's really not meant meanly or hurtfully. How do you know the insults are only in fun? Does the author give you any clues so that you do get this?



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At other times, the confrontations between Mikey and Matt are more serious. See if you can find one piece of dialogue between them where they are seriously in conflict.

Who do you think is more in control in the situation you have chosen – Mikey or Matt? How do you know this? Do you think this is typical of the relationship or an exception to the way it usually works?

Overall, who do you think is the better friend to the other? Or is that not a fair question? And how would you sum up the relationship between Mikey and Matt? Even without the sacrifice Mikey makes at the end of the book to save Matt's life, would you say it is clear that Mikey and Matt love each other? What makes you agree (or disagree) with that?

Matt and Anna

Matt's other friendship in the story is with Anna. This relationship starts as a fairly casual friendship. See if you can find a scene from early in the book where you would say that's how things are between them.

As the novel goes on, it's clear that the friendship is developing into an attraction. Where in the story would you say the relationship is at its most intense?

No relationship in this book is simple. All feelings are mixed. Would you agree with that statement? At what stage in Matt's relationship with Anna would you say the emotions are most confused?

Mrs Chung and Lucy (Matt's mother)

Here is a relationship where the emotions seem a lot clearer. These two women used to be friends, but now there is a very clear rift between them, and Mrs Chung has no regard any more for Lucy. See if you can find something that Mrs Chung says – a sentence or two – that reveals just how much contempt she feels for her former friend.

Sexual identity and body image

There are some very interesting things going on in this story to do with sexual identity. On the one hand, the author (through the narrator) is



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both quite open about these issues and at the same time not at all explicit about the sexual identity of the characters. Again, it's a question of 'People are complicated.'

Early in the book when Mikey is attacked by Hammer and his mates, there is a clear homophobic tone to their insults, and the attack comes very close to sexual assault. Later in the story, there are tenuous suggestions that possibly Mikey is gay, but it is never resolved. At the same time, 'gay' and 'girly' are used here among the boys as terms of abuse, though, as Matt himself notes, the opposite should really be the case.

There is some ambivalence also about Matt. He himself thinks he looks like a girl, especially since he lost a lot of weight before the opening of the story. This is partly because he wears his hair long and in a ponytail. Later in the story he does seem to come across as heterosexual, especially in relation to Anna, but the author has left it open.

What is certainly clear is that Mikey eats far too much unhealthy food, and it is not unlikely that his addiction to food is connected to his insecurities. The author has managed to create, in Mikey, a character who is extremely likeable – lovable, even, you might think – and who is also extremely overweight. Considering social attitudes to overweight people, that is quite an achievement – would you agree?

Sometimes Mikey seems not to be bothered by his fat, makes a joke of it, but at other times it does seem to be a problem for him. Can you find an episode in the story where Mikey seems not to mind being so overweight, or one where you get the impression it is a problem for him?

And then there is the interesting fact that Matt himself used to be overweight too, but then lost it, and by the end of the book is beginning to put on weight again. What do you make of that?

Skateboarding, surfing ... and other addictive pursuits

Mikey's craving for food is not the only hint of addiction in this story. Matt's instant passion for surfing, once he is introduced to it, has the potential to be an addiction, and we know his father has an addictive



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streak in him too. And then of course there is an important subplot concerning drugs and drug-taking. This book faces up squarely to the fact of addictions (hardly ever actually naming them as such, though) without being in any way judgmental. Another remarkable achievement of the author.

And finally ...

There is a lot going on in this novel, and it all seems to happen very quickly, which makes it an exciting read. Would you agree?

Can you identify one scene in the novel that stands out for you as important – for the story, or for the way the characters are portrayed, or for the emotional impact it makes? (If a scene makes you laugh, that counts as an emotion too – it doesn't all have to be fear or joy or anger or longing or tears!)

Writing exercise

This part is easy! Write a short summary of the scene you have chosen as one that stands out for you – a paragraph or two should be plenty – making sure to cover everything important that happens in the scene.

This part is a bit more difficult – but give it a go! Re-read your chosen scene in the book and see if you can work out what the author has done to make it exciting or revealing, over and above what you have mentioned in your summary of what *happens* in the scene.

And this part is for people who really like writing! Examine your chosen scene carefully again, and now have a go at writing it in the form of a film script, a play or a song lyric.

Now, having read the whole book (you have, haven't you), what would you identify as the high point of the novel? (There is no right answer to this. It's just a question about how the book affects you personally.)

Did you enjoy the book? Did you learn anything from it? Were you emotionally affected by it? Do you think the author has done a good job? Do you think she has reflected modern teenage life well? Is there



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anything you dislike about the book? Is there anything you feel is missing from the story?

Would you recommend this novel to a friend? What age group would you recommend it for? Do you think boys or girls would enjoy it more? Would you give it to an adult? Why or why not?

One last writing exercise

See if you can describe this book in a **sentence**. Not the story – that would take far more than a **sentence** – but the *kind* of book it is, how it is written, what it is 'about'. You might want to use words like *exciting, emotional, friendship, rough, hard-hitting, funny, fear, realistic, dysfunctional, high ...* Or not!