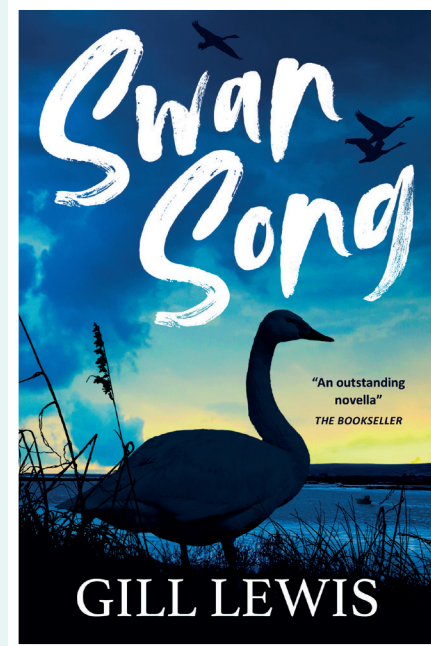


# Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM RESOURCES



## SWAN SONG

Gill Lewis

**PART 1** Synopsis and Themes

**PART 2** Suggested Questions to Develop Reading Strategies

**PART 3** Creative Writing Activities

**ABOUT GILL LEWIS**

## PART 1 SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

### SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

This guide has been produced to provide ideas for guiding readers through Gill Lewis' **Swan Song**, a short novel with pertinent and powerful themes. The guide is written to be used after reading the full text in order to discuss the book as a whole.

A synopsis is followed by quotes from the book with suggestions for discussion points designed to help readers engage with the complex topics the book covers. The questions assigned to each quote are intended to further understanding of the text and provide opportunities for classroom discussion or written work. There are also suggestions for creative writing exercises.

We hope you enjoy using these materials with your students.

Gill Lewis' **Swan Song** is the story of Dylan and his family, and how their lives change as they battle to save an injured whooper swan and its beautiful natural habitat.

Dylan is struggling, he's just started secondary school and everything is getting too much for him to handle. When he's expelled, Dylan and his mum are forced to move to a tiny seaside town in Wales to live with his grandad. At first Dylan is unsure of his new home with no TV or internet and a grandad he doesn't know very well. He feels lost. But when Grandad invites Dylan out on his boat to watch the whooper swans return to their winter feeding ground, things begin to change. Grandad doesn't judge or question, and out on the water, without the distractions and pressures of school, Dylan begins to feel like himself again. But when the Swan Fields are bought to be turned into a holiday park and Grandad suffers a stroke, it's up to Dylan to save the swans and help his grandad too.

**Swan Song** is written in an accessible style, covering an array of topics in a gentle and touching manner. This book is perfect for classroom discussions as it will help readers engage with topics around mental health, anxiety, grief, the importance of kindness, and protecting nature.



## PART 2 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO DEVELOP READING STRATEGIES

*I didn't fit in there. I wasn't a team player, as I was often told. I was letting the school down. I was letting everyone else down. I was letting myself down. I was a let-down. A failure. A fail. [page 3-4]*

[...]

*Teachers kept telling us we had to work hard or we'd fail. They said exams were getting more difficult. I was falling behind with work. My friends were changing too, and I couldn't hold on to them – or even to who I was. It was like falling down a deep dark hole that kept getting deeper and deeper and darker and darker. I didn't know when I'd hit the bottom. [page 14]*

[...]

*It's not like I had any friends any more. Maybe they'd gossip for a day or two but then forget about me. As if I'd never even existed.*

*I never knew how easy it is for people to vanish. [page 15]*

### Discuss Dylan's feelings and how he expresses them:

- What do you think is making Dylan feel this way?
- How does Dylan react to feeling stressed and anxious?
  - Provide examples from the text to support your answer.
- Do you understand how Dylan is feeling? Do you think Dylan's feelings are realistic?

### Using the above quotes, explore the author's use of language to discuss how Dylan feels:

- What kind of imagery does the author use?
  - What other images could be used to describe the same feelings?
- Do you think the language the author is using is emotive?
  - How does it make you feel?
  - Which phrases or words do you find most impactful as a reader? Why?

*“Back then, men weren’t meant to show feelings, so I hid them from your mother. I just closed up. I never talked about your grandmother. She was my wife. My Eve. My whole world stopped when she died.” [page 86-87]*

[...]

*“In all the time I was at school, no one asked me how I felt. Teachers got mad at me, and other pupils cheered me on when I was rude. Asim was the only person who saw how much I was hurting. He was the only one who asked how I felt. I remember he said he didn’t like seeing me so said and said he wanted to help. [...] I hated him because he cared about me and he saw how low I’d got. I hated myself.” [page 114]*

### Discuss the importance of expressing your emotions:

- Do you think the characters find it hard to talk about how they feel? Why?
  - How does this change throughout the book?
- What similarities are there between Dylan and his grandad in the way they show their emotions and talk about their feelings?
- In what ways has losing his wife affected Dylan’s grandad?
  - How does the author convey this effect on his mood, actions or behaviour? Provide three examples from the text.
- What effect does Dylan’s behaviour have on his mother?
  - How does their relationship change throughout the book? Provide examples from the text.



*Mum must have told him that I'd been expelled from school, so he'd probably hate me already.*

*But Grandad smiled at us when he came to the door. He stood there in his jeans and an old chunky jumper that was as white as his hair and welcomed us in. [page 20]*

[...]

*As winter turned into spring, Grandad and I spent more time out on the estuary. [...] Grandad let me steer the boat, and he taught me lots of sailor's knots, how to look after the engine and how to use the VHF radio. [page 81]*

[...]

*Grandad got really cross. He tried to say something, but the words slurred and he became even more angry.*

*Lost everything, he typed. My wife, my boat, my voice, my choir, my swans. [...] But Grandad just turned away from me. When I left, I heard him throwing stuff about the room and the sound of ripping paper. [page 99]*

### Explore the relationship between Dylan and his grandad:

- How does their relationship change throughout the book?
- How does his grandad's stroke change Dylan's relationship with him? Why does it change their relationship?
- How do the characters support one another at different points in the book? Provide examples from the text.



*And so the Swan Fields were saved. And it wasn't just swans that needed the Swan Fields. There were so many other birds. We saw red kites, water rails and grey wagtails. We had saved a piece of the wild. [page 112]*

[...]

*All I could think is that I wanted to get back out on the water where there was no talk of school, no school bells or homework. No tests or timetables. No walls or corridors.*

*Just the wind, the waves and the wild white swans.*

*A place where the world was turning.*

*A place where, for the first time in a long while, I had felt free. [page 52]*

### Explore themes of wildness and nature in the book:

- What do the Swan Fields mean to the characters? Why are they important?
- Is it more than just conservation driving the desire to save the Swan Fields?
  - What are the motives of both Dylan and his grandad? Provide examples from the text.
- In what ways does nature help or hinder the characters in the book? Provide examples from the text to support your answer.

### Examine the quotes above:

- How does the author describe the importance of nature for the characters?
  - How does this differ from the language used to describe school?
- What kind of imagery does the author use to describe nature, the sea and the swans?
  - What words would you choose to describe nature? How different or similar is this to the language used by the author?



*The swan called again, and when I looked out of the cabin she was flying in circles above the Nerys-Jane. It was as if she wanted me to get going. [page 90]*

[...]

*I feel as if I got lost and have now found myself again. I've found the me I like.*

*I couldn't have done it without my swan.*

*I know she saved me. [page 117]*

[...]

*She is the last to come in to land. She flies in a circle with her white wings outspread.*

*Angel wings.*

*She sees me, and I see her too.*

*My swan.*

*My angel. [page 119]*

## Explore the role of the swan in the book:

- How does the swan help Dylan?
  - What does time spent with the animal offer to him?
  - How does his connection with the animal change him or his mood?
  - Provide examples from the text to support your answer.
- What do you think the swan symbolises in the book? Could the swan symbolise more than one thing?
  - How does the author convey this symbolism to the reader?
  - What evidence can you find to support your answer?

*“Being brave is knowing you’re scared but going anyway.” [page 94]*

## Explore themes of bravery and kindness in the book:

- What do the characters do to help one another in the book? How do they show kindness to one another? Provide at least two examples from the text.
- How does the village show Dylan kindness?
  - Is there anyone who does not?
  - Does this contrast with anywhere else in Dylan’s life?
- Do you think Dylan is brave? How does he show bravery in the text?
  - How does the author convey this bravery? Give an example from the text.

*“There is a saying: you have to learn to accept the things you cannot change, but be brave enough to change the things you can.” [page 96-97]*

## Examine the quote above:

- What does this saying mean to you? How do you interpret it?
  - How does it apply to Dylan and his situation? Can you provide examples from the text to support your answer?





## Swan Song For Eve

*When the cold north wind is blowing  
And storms rage across the sea  
I stand and call your name  
And I call you back to me.*

*Come back home, come back home  
Come back home to me.*

*Your home is in this valley  
In this salt marsh estuary  
Here beneath this winter sky  
You belong with me*

*Come back home, come back home  
Come back home to me.*

*I see white wings over water  
And I see you flying free  
I want to hold you one more time  
I want you here with me*

*Come back home, come back home  
Come back home to me.*

*And when the dark is falling  
And I can no longer see  
I feel your wings around me  
And know you're here with me*

*Come back home, come back home  
Come back home to me.*

**[page 102-103]**

### Discuss Grandad's song:

- How does the author use music in the book to bring people together?
- Does the song have more than one meaning? What are they?
- What type of imagery is the author using to express loss?
- Do you find the song emotive? Why?



## PART 3 CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES

### Create a leaflet for the crowdfunding concert:

- What information would be on the leaflet?
- How could you make it look eye-catching?

### Write something from the perspective of the swan:

- Imagine you are the swan in the field. How would you feel about being saved?
- What would the journey from Iceland look like?
- How would you feel about trying to save Dylan and Grandad?

### Write your own song or poem about nature:

- What descriptive language could you use?
- What imagery would you include?
- How would you make the piece emotive?



## ABOUT GILL LEWIS



Gill Lewis worked as a vet in the UK and across the world before becoming the acclaimed author of several books for children, including *Sky Hawk* and *Gorilla Dawn*. Gill's writing has earned her numerous awards such as the UKLA Children's Book Award and the Little Rebels Award, and several nominations for prestigious awards including the CILIP Carnegie Medal. Find out more about Gill and her books at [www.gilllewis.com](http://www.gilllewis.com)



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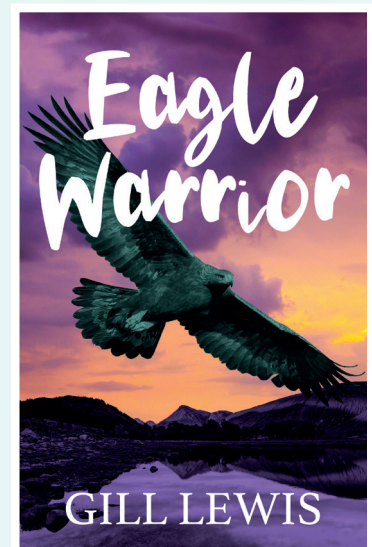
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