



# Reading Notes

Life of a Teenage  
Bodysnatcher  
Doug MacLeod

## SYNOPSIS:

Thomas Timewell is in a cemetery, digging up his grandfather when a man called Plenitude makes him an offer he can't refuse. Plenitude is a body-snatcher and he wants Thomas to work for him, digging up bodies and selling them to hospitals for scientific purposes. Being a gentleman, Thomas refuses. He is only digging up his grandfather to honour the good man's final wishes to serve medicine. However, Plenitude convinces Thomas with a spot of blackmail.

Soon a reluctant Thomas finds himself up to his neck in trouble. There is rival body-snatcher gang that wants him and Plenitude dead, and a tattooed gypsy fortune teller with a meat cleaver and a secret she can't wait to share with Thomas. Along the way, Thomas finds the time to fall in love with Victoria Plum, a lady novelist of dubious ability and great popularity. He even manages to save his good friend Charlie Callow from a sadistic teacher.

Meanwhile, Thomas's mother is suspicious. She wants to know where Thomas goes at night. Thomas invents ever more ludicrous excuses, but once roused the lady's suspicion cannot be easily quenched. As the plot thickens, Thomas discovers that his mother harbours a dark secret of her own.

All is revealed on a dark moor when Plenitude tells his own story, changing Thomas's life forever. After a nail-biting climax, most if not all the characters get to live happily ever after – sort of.

## WRITING STYLE

Narrated in the first person present tense, this is a darkly funny novel set in London in 1828. Despite the period setting, it's a surprisingly modern tale. Doug MacLeod writes in clear, concise prose, allowing the story to zip along at a galloping pace, piling one weird over-the-top event on top of another. There are macabre laughs to be had and a sweet love story for readers to lose themselves in. It's all written with Doug MacLeod's usual originality and flair.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug MacLeod is the author of the children's classic *Sister Madge's Book of Nuns*. He also wrote the comic coming-of-age novels, *Siggy and Amber*, *I'm Being Stalked by a Moonshadow* and *Tumble Turn*. He also wrote the hilarious send-up fantasy *Kevin the Troll*, and a Buddhist fairy tale called *Clockwork Forest*.

# EDITORIAL COMMENTS

I'm a big Doug MacLeod fan. He is among the truly original writers for children and a great subversive, comic talent. Coming left of centre his books never fail to surprise. *Life of a Teenage Body-snatcher* does not fail in that regard. It's gripping from beginning to end, immersing readers in a fog-shrouded adventure that is evoked in all its gloriously gory detail. Intelligent kid readers – and some adults – will love the tongue-in-cheek humour.

# STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES:

- Research the term Resurrectionist or Body Snatcher. What did they do and why? How would the resurrectionists be regarded by the rest of society?
- Research England 1824. What was society like? Find some visual images of how people dressed etc. What do these pictures reveal about the sort of society it was?
- This novel draws heavily on the themes and ideas in well known gothic and romantic novels. Read some (abridged) examples of early 19<sup>th</sup> Century literature – eg *Frankenstein*; *Wuthering Heights*; *Sherlock Holmes*. Make a list of the common ideas – moors, lunatic asylums, prostitutes, class divisions, robbers, cutthroats, Jack the Ripper etc.

## THEMES:

- Identity
- Writing History
- Morality
- Hypocrisy
- What's in a Name?
- Writing Humour

## CHARACTERS:

**Thomas Timewell**

- From the start, Thomas appears to be a somewhat unusual young man. In digging up his grandfather's coffin, against the wishes of his family, he shows himself to be headstrong and determined. He also reveals a fierce loyalty to his grandfather and a keen interest in science.
- In spite of the fact that Thomas meets a number of bizarre and unusual characters, he remains clam and in control at all times. He is obviously clever and uses his wit to its full advantage, managing to ward off a number of potentially perilous attacks.
- For all that Thomas clearly does not fit in with the rest of his family, he remains surprisingly loyal to them. Both his mother and his brother treat him appallingly, yet he is always polite and helpful towards them.
- Like the dashing hero in many romance stories, Thomas falls instantly and deeply in love with Victoria. Even the disastrous start to their relationship does not deter him and he remains confident that their love will ultimately prevail.

### **Plenitude**

- For much of the story, Plenitude remains a man of mystery. It is hard to decide whether he is a good character, or a villain as Tolerance would have us believe. Certainly he is involved in some shady dealings, but for the most part, the stories about him are exactly that.
- Plenitude is obviously a caring and loving person. In spite of her rejection of him and his subsequent harrowing time in Bedlam, he is still loyal to and indeed in love with Thomas' mother. He is also extremely good to his demented sister, Carolyn. From the outset, his relationship with Thomas is a protective, fathering role – somewhat ironic given that he is later revealed to be just that, Thomas's father.

### **John Timewell**

- John is an incredibly precocious child of only fourteen. His decision to move out into his own mansion, away from his mother's house shows a great deal of arrogance and selfishness. In doing so, John manages to live exactly as he wishes, whilst Thomas is left to cope with an increasingly difficult and intoxicated mother. Clearly he is intelligent, as he has made a lot of money in the business world, but his methods are slightly questionable, as is the fact that he has his mother unwittingly sign all of his papers for him. In this way he symbolises many businessmen (both of his time and indeed of any era) who are ruthless and uncaring in their quest for material wealth.
- Unlike Thomas who is gentle and compassionate towards others, John is heartless. His concern at Atkins' book has nothing to do with Thomas' reputation, but of the harm it might do John. Similarly, when Thomas suggests that he use his newly inherited wealth to open an orphanage, John cannot even grasp the rationale behind this suggestion. He does ultimately take in two orphans, but not out of any sense of charity or philanthropy. They have simply been taken in as personal servants, required to meet his every need.

### **Mrs Timewell**

- Thomas's mother lives in a drug induced haze, brought on by her addiction to laudanum. She lies about her husband's death, romanticising it to suit her needs and draw sympathy from others, whilst concealing her own heartless behaviour.

The questionable 'adoption' of John brings her character into further questioning.

- Her reaction to Carolyn's illegitimate child was certainly not unusual for women of her time. Through her character, the author manages to show the hypocrisy of the time, in that she becomes the poor, respected widow, whilst her blameless sister-in-law is much maligned and has her life destroyed by Mrs Timewell's actions.
- Yet, her relationship with her sons has clearly never been good, and the reader suspects that her guilt has caused her to live a less happy life that she might otherwise have enjoyed. Her 'facts of life talk' with Thomas (p100) clearly shows the awkwardness of their relationship and her lack of parenting skills.
- Mrs Timewell surrounds herself with shallow, artificial friends and spends her time either taking drugs or reading trashy romance stories – both a form of escapism from the reality of her life.

### **Mr Josiah Atkins**

- Mr Atkins, the teacher, is very much a product of his time. Like the teachers in Tom Brown's schooldays, he delights in bullying and making his students' lives a misery. His open confession of his brutal teaching strategies shows the attitudes of the time towards children, and the role of authority figures. In an era in which children were very much to be seen but not heard, he would easily have got away with this behaviour and indeed even been applauded for it. He is the type of teacher who would have had a profoundly negative effect upon his students.

### **Charlie Callow**

- Charlie is the product of Mr Atkins' bullying. An unfortunate looking, weaker student, he presented an easy target for his teacher. When we first meet him, he is a meek, downtrodden and miserable child. Even his own father questions his worth. Yet once the bullying stops, Charlie gains both confidence and strength and is able to be his own man.

### **Victoria Plum**

- Like the heroine in romance novels, Victoria is beautiful and the picture of all things womanly. Every man falls instantly under her spell, captivated by her beauty and her manner. Yet she is easily able to manipulate those around her, and for much of the novel treats Thomas badly.
- Like all women of her time, she is restricted by the social attitudes. Whilst she is a writer, she must hide behind a male identity if she wants her work to be taken seriously.

### **ACTIVITY:**

- Imagine that this novel is to be made into a film. What actors would you choose to play each character? Explain or justify your decisions.

## **POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:**

### **Identity**

- Like many literary pieces of the time, this novel has at its centre a case of mistaken or disguised identity.
- What identities in this novel are disguised?
- Consider at what point the true relationships between Plenitude, Thomas and Carolyn become clear. Did you make the connections before Plenitude revealed his story?
- Throughout the novel, the author has used the device of **foreshadowing** to give us clues as to the real situation. After you have finished the book, make a list of all the clues you can find that lead up to the final revelation regarding people's identities.
- Can you think of any reason why this might have been such a popular literary device at this time? (Consider how strict social customs and expectations were at the time)

Students could watch *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Pirates of Penzance* or a similar story in which identities are concealed.

### Writing History:

- This novel reveals a lot of information about the society of England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century
- As you read, make a note of all the facts you learn about the society in which Thomas Timewell is living.
- The novel refers to a number of other literary works of the time. Who is Jane Austen? What is the book by Mary Shelly? The butcher of Saville Row to whom Plenitude refers is Sweeny Todd. How do these references add interest to the novel?

### Morality

Throughout the novel, a number of questions are raised about morality.

Consider the following:

- Plenitude is happy to remove the bodies from their graves, but is concerned about taking their clothes. It was a felony (crime) to steal possessions, but body snatching was regarded as a misdemeanour rather than a felony. What questions might this raise about society?
- Charlie Callow's father would prefer his son to be arrested for soliciting rather than admit that he is a 'nancy-boy' (p198)
- A number of characters die in the course of this novel. Are any of the deaths justifiable a) to the characters? b) to you?
- Mrs Timewell condemns her husband and sister-in-law to Bedlam rather than taking in Carolyn's illegitimate child. She is able to maintain a well regarded status in society.
- Consider Plenitude's question: *Am I a monster for taking the lady's dentures that are no longer required by her? Or is the lady a monster for having the teeth made?* (p224)
- Is body snatching a bad thing, given that it provided medical students with corpses to study in anatomy classes and therefore advanced medical science?

### ACTIVITY:

- Stage a class debate or discussion on the pros and cons of body snatching

## **Hypocrisy**

Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century England was a very hypocritical society. Consider the following:

- Men were expected to sow their wild oats before marriage, but girls were expected to remain virtuous.
- The upper classes were all about show and snobbery eg consider John's comment about the portrait *I detest it, but it is by Thomas Gainsborough so of course it is superb* (p107)
- Mrs Timewell's female friends are nothing short of disgraceful, but they are all highly respected
- Mrs Timewell's treatment of Mrs Dunwoody
- Mr Higgins, the publisher, judges his manuscripts entirely by weight rather than their literary merit
- Victoria is disregarded by Mr Higgins simply by virtue of being a woman, yet Aubrey Wilks is his best selling author

Can you find any other examples of hypocrisy in the novel?

## **What's in a name?**

- Why do the resurrectionists all take false names?
- Consider the names they choose for themselves: Plenitude, Tolerance, Clemency, Intellect, Prudence/Girth.

What does each of these names actually mean? In what ways are they appropriate or inappropriate for these characters?

## **Writing Humour**

There are many very entertaining and humorous passages in this novel. In many of them the humour is created by adding personal interpretations and eccentricities to a situation.

- Consider the use of puns eg Dancing on Mr Atkins' grave (p136). How do puns add to the humour?
- Exaggeration or hyperbole is another way of adding humour. What examples of exaggeration can you find?
- Many of the characters are almost caricatures. What techniques has the author used to make the characters larger than life and hence entertaining?
- Choose a passage from the novel that you find particularly humorous and read it aloud to the class. Try to explain what it is about this piece that makes it particularly amusing.

## **ACTIVITY:**

- Imagine that Thomas and Plenitude resurrected another body. Who do you think they might encounter? Write your own chapter of their adventure.

## **Writing dialogue**

- Examine the way in which the author has written Mrs Dunwoody's dialogue in a broad Scottish dialect. Mrs Dunwoody is difficult to understand because Thomas is too arrogant to represent her speech as being lucid. What does this say about Thomas?
- How does the use of writing in dialogue add to the characterisation? How does it add to the humour of the story?

**ACTIVITY:**

- Create a character of your own who speaks with an accent. Write a few lines of dialogue that reflect the way your character speaks. Share your dialogue with a partner who (i) translates your words and (ii) writes a reply in the same accent.
- In pairs, write a dialogue between two characters, one of whom speaks standard English and the other who speaks with an accent. What misunderstandings are likely to occur? Be as entertaining as possible.

**Vocabulary**

This novel is full of words that are unusual for modern readers. As you read, make a note of any new or unusual words and find their meanings.