

***News of the Dead* by James Robertson**

Discussion notes for Reading Groups

News of the Dead is a historical novel set in Glen Conach, an isolated place in North-East Scotland. The story is set in three different periods separated by hundreds of years.

In ancient Pictland, the Christian hermit Conach contemplates God and nature, performs miracles and prepares himself for sacrifice.

Generations later, in the early nineteenth century, self-promoting antiquarian Charles Gibb comes to inspect the *Book of Conach*, now kept in the big house at the heart of the glen's fragile community.

In the present day, young Lachie whispers to Maja of a ghost he thinks she has seen. Reflecting on her long life, Maja believes him, for she has ghosts of her own.

1. Discuss the role 'the glen' plays in each time period and across the book as a whole. Is the glen a 'character'?
2. The narrative switches between different eras and stories frequently. Why has the author chosen to structure the novel in this way? Does it work?
3. Consider the different perspectives (Charles Gibb, the unknown author of the *Book of Conach*, Maja) of the narrators of the book. What effect do these perspectives have on how the reader follows the plot?
4. Discuss the conflict between written and oral history in the novel, and the differences between facts, legends, folktales, memories and lies.
5. Discuss the language and voices of the novel.
6. How is religious belief – and 'belief' generally – depicted in the novel?
7. People come into and depart from Glen Conach all the time. How does this fit with ideas of refuge and sanctuary? How are strangers received and why do some inhabitants leave?
8. Discuss the different roles and personalities of the male and female characters.
9. What roles do illness, disease and violence have?
10. How does the 'story of the dumb lass' relate to what has happened previously?