



The Clear-Out

Deborah Ellis

Reading Level: 3

Interest Level: Adult

Book Summary

Duncan is very angry. Tess, his wife, has turned their dining room into a library. For forty years, she says, she has cleaned the house while he sat in front of the TV. Now she deserves a room of her own.

Then disaster strikes: Tess gets sick, and soon Duncan is alone. Right away, he clears out the books he hates. Suddenly, things in the house start to move around by themselves. A strange message appears in the kitchen. Is the house haunted?

Scared, Duncan turns to two unlikely friends. With their help, he learns a great deal about himself, about Tess, and about lasting love.

Author Biography

Deborah Ellis is an award-winning author and a long-time peace activist. She has worked as a women's mental health counsellor and volunteered at refugee camps in Afghanistan. Deborah's bestselling series *The Breadwinner Trilogy* is based on a story told to her by a refugee. Deborah lives in Simcoe, Ontario.

Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

Book Cover and Title

- (a) Read the title to the students. Ask them to describe what they see on the front cover. Ask them who they think might use this room, and why.
- (b) Ask students what images come to mind when they hear the term *clear out*. Ask students what they think might be cleared out in the story, and why.
- (c) Ask students to predict what kind of story this might be (adventure, mystery, romance, crime) and give reasons for their prediction.

WORKING WITH THE BOOK

Characters

Tell students that readers can learn about the characters in a novel in three ways—by (1) what the writer tells us, (2) what the characters say, do, and think, and (3) what others say about the characters. As they read the book, have students note how the writer develops the character of Bobby. Encourage students to make inferences where possible.

How do we make inferences?

Active readers use their experience and knowledge to make educated guesses about characters and their motives. Readers who make inferences use clues in the text together with their own experiences to help them figure out the author's meaning.

Character: Bobby

What the writer tells us

Inference

What the character says, does, and thinks

Inference

What other characters think and say about the character

“And I am not Bobby, so don’t talk to me as if I was seven years old.”

Inference

Bobby is 28 years old. In Duncan’s mind, Bobby is immature.

After reading the entire book, have students work in small groups and share their notes. Then have them discuss the following questions:

- (a) Would you like to have Bobby as a son? Why or why not?
- (b) Discuss what the following saying means:

Like father, like son.

In what ways does the saying describe Duncan and Bobby?

- (c) How much of an effect did Duncan and Tess have on how Bobby turned out as an adult? Give examples to support your opinion.
- (d) How much control do you think parents have over how their children turn out—a lot? Some? A little? No control? Give reasons for your opinion.

Plot

Even after Tess dies, she remains an important character that moves the plot forward. As students read through the novel, have them note examples of how Tess influences Duncan, even after her death.

How Tess's character moves the plot forward after she dies

Duncan takes all of her books to a thrift store, where he meets Kevin.

Setting

Explain to students that the setting provides details of when and where events take place. The details of the setting add to the story in some way. As students read the book, have them complete the chart by noting examples of events that take place in the dining room.

Setting	Events
Dining room	<i>Tess speaks to Duncan in a calm tone, which Duncan doesn't like. Duncan expects Tess to be upset because he's upset.</i>

After reading the entire book, have students work in small groups and share their notes. Then tell the students that the setting, the dining room, is connected to one of the main themes in the story, which is the power struggle between Duncan and Tess. Have the students discuss the change in power between Duncan and Tess and how the events that take place in the dining room illustrate the change.

TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. “I have a decision to make. What do I want to do with the rest of my life?”
(page 12)
 - (a) What did Tess want to do with the rest of her life? Why did she feel she deserved to do what she wanted? Do you think she deserved to do what she wanted? Give reasons for your opinion.
 - (b) Why was Tess able to build her library, even though Duncan was against it?
 - (c) When was the last time you put your foot down? How did you know it was time to put your foot down? What gave you the will, or strength, to take a stand?

2. “How I look is not important to me anymore.” (page 17)
 - (a) Why were her looks not important to Tess anymore?
 - (b) How did Tess behave at the annual clubhouse dinner at the golf course? Why did she behave this way? Do you think Tess was right to behave as she did? Why or why not?
 - (c) What do you think upset Duncan about Tess’s behaviour the most?
 - (d) People often change their behaviour depending on where they are and who they are with. For example, someone may be outgoing when out with good friends but say little when visiting in-laws. Does changing behaviour mean people are not being true to themselves? Give reasons for your opinion.

3. “He wanted to ask her all of those questions. But he couldn’t ask any of them.”
(page 20)
 - (a) What questions does Duncan want to ask Tess? Why can’t he ask her the questions? How do you think Duncan feels at this moment?
 - (b) What does Duncan do instead of asking Tess the questions? Why do you think he does this?
 - (c) How might Duncan have made things better between him and Tess?

4. “He started filling the bags with books. He grabbed them all and threw them in the bags...” (page 24)
 - (a) Why do you think Duncan decides to clear out Tess’s library at this moment? What is Duncan really trying to clear out?
 - (b) Think about when Tess cleared out the dining room to make way for her library. What was Tess really trying to clear out? What was she really making room for?

5. “ ‘Grief takes many forms,’ Reverend Jones said.” (page 34)
 - (a) What else does Reverend Jones say about grief? What advice does he give Duncan? What is your opinion about Reverend Jones’s words and advice?
 - (b) Do you think Duncan felt comforted by Reverend Jones’s words and advice? Give a reason for your opinion.
 - (c) Some people go to places of worship for words of comfort. Where else can people find words of comfort? Who do you turn to for words of comfort? Who turns to you?

6. “I’m nearly seventy years old, and I have no friends I can have a serious conversation with.” (page 42)
 - (a) How do you feel toward Duncan when he says these words? Explain why you feel that way.
 - (b) Who does Duncan turn to? Why?
 - (c) What experiences do Kevin and Duncan end up sharing in common?
 - (d) Many people use Facebook. On Facebook, people can have 20, 200, or 2000 friends, or more. What makes a person a true friend? Do you think it is possible to have hundreds or thousands of friends?

7. “If their parents want them to have a skateboard park, then let their parents pay for it.” (page 50)
 - (a) Do you agree with Duncan’s way of thinking? Give a reason for your answer.
 - (b) Which of the following would you agree to spend (more) tax money on? Give reasons for your opinion.

(i) public transport	(ii) a hockey arena	(iii) a new park
(iv) bicycle paths	(v) job training programs	(vi) an opera house

8. “I’m a proud gay man. That in itself is a sign of success.” (page 51)
- (a) Why do you think Kevin believes that being a proud gay man is a sign of success?
 - (b) In what ways does getting to know Kevin change Duncan?
 - (c) Have you ever changed your opinion about someone? What did you base your first opinion on? What made you change your opinion?
9. “All I did for her [Tess]. She had a good life. She never had anything to complain about.” (page 55)
- (a) In what ways was Duncan a good husband to Tess? In what ways did he fail her?
 - (b) What does “a good life” mean to you?
 - (c) Do you think Tess had a good life? Give reasons for your answer.
10. “You were a chore!” (page 68)
- (a) Who is Duncan talking to? Are his words true? Support your opinion.
 - (b) What truths does Duncan finally admit about himself? What good comes of admitting these truths?
 - (c) Why do people sometimes hide truths from themselves?

WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Choose a character or event from the novel that you connected with in some way. For example, did the character or event remind you of something in your life? Cause an emotional reaction in you? Teach you something? Describe how and why in a paragraph.
2. Tess influenced Duncan even after she had died. Think about someone who continues to influence you, even though they are not in your daily life. It may be someone who has passed away or moved away or drifted out of your life for some reason. Write a letter to that person explaining how they have continued to influence you, and why.

3. Just before Tess dies, Duncan wishes that he had not lost the habit of talking to Tess. Think of your habits. Which habit would you like to keep? Write about the habit. Describe what it is, how it affects you, and how you can develop the habit.

4. Duncan is annoyed that his tax money was spent on a skateboard park. He writes a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. Think about your community. How would you like to see your tax money spent? Write a letter to your local newspaper describing what you would like tax money to be spent on in your community, and why.

5. Tess wanted a special place of her own in her home. Think about a place you know, or knew when you were younger, that feels special to you. The place can be a city or town, or a smaller place like a certain bench on a city street, the shore of a small lake, or a favourite park. Write a paragraph that describes your special place, why you like it, and how it makes you feel.

6. Choose a person you know or have known well. The person can be living or have passed away. Write ten questions you would like to ask this person but are afraid to ask face to face. Then imagine the person is asking you those same questions. Write answers for the questions.

7. Write a fan letter to Deborah Ellis, the author of *The Clear-Out*. Tell her your opinion of her book.

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PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

1. Give a Book Report

Have students give an oral book report. They can state the author and title of the book, explain why they chose the book, give a summary of the story (without giving the story away), describe a favourite part of and character in the story, and give their general opinion of the book.

2. Don't judge a book by its cover

Have students each bring in a photo. The student must be in the photo. Have students discuss how the saying, “Don't judge a book by its cover” applies not only to books but also to other aspects of life, such as judging people by appearances. Then have students paste their photo on the cover of a notebook. Have the students look at their photo and think about the following questions:

- (a) What truths about me does the photo reveal?
- (b) What truths about me does the photo not reveal?

Tell students the notebook is now their autobiography, a book they will write about themselves. Have students fill the notebook with pictures, illustrations, favourite poems, movie titles, colours, words—anything that reveals who they are.

3. Find out what happens

Find a copy of *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* and read the book as a class. Or check a local library to see if there is a DVD of the movie available for loan.

4. Share a tale from beyond

Have students share experiences from their lives that have a ghostly or mystical aspect to them. Then have them write their stories and illustrate them in some way. Bind the stories into an anthology. Students can then come up with a title and design a cover for their anthology.

5. Find your happy place

Have students draw a floor plan of their home. Encourage the students to make the floor plan as detailed as possible. Have the students draw a small circle in the spot where they spend most of their waking hours. Provide students with coloured pencils. Have students choose a coloured pencil to represent the word *happy*. Then have them choose coloured pencils to represent the words *hopeful* and *frustrated*.

Have students use the coloured pencils to shade in the areas of their floor plan that connect in some way with the three emotions. Invite students to talk about their floor plans to the extent that they feel comfortable sharing their ideas.

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