



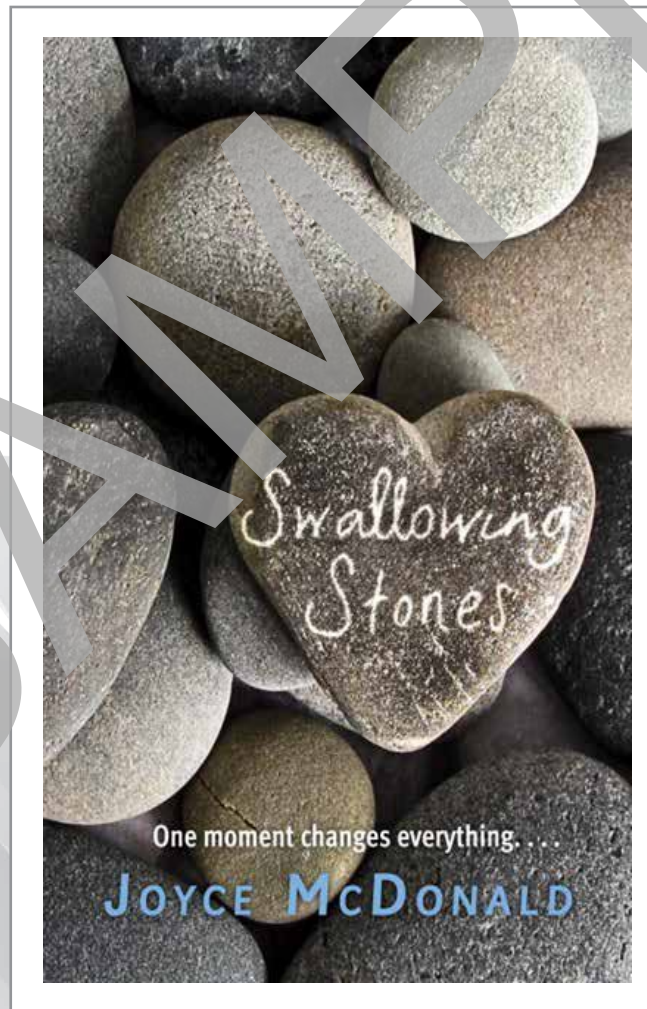
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Swallowing Stones

Joyce McDonald



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Swallowing Stones

Joyce McDonald

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Brainstorming, analysis,  
compare/contrast, research

### Literary Elements

Simile, metaphor, symbolism,  
irony, characterization, plot,  
theme, point of view

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, monologue, oral  
presentation

### Writing

Description, poetry, legend,  
sequel, newspaper article,  
book review

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting,  
inferring, conflict

### Vocabulary

Definitions, applications

### Across the Curriculum

Art—montage, sketch;  
Drama—script; Music—  
appropriate selections;  
Current Events—articles

**Genre:** young-adult fiction

**Setting:** present-day Briarwood, New Jersey

**Themes:** actions have consequences; ethical responsibility; dealing with grief; empathy

**Point of View:** third-person omniscient

**Conflict:** person vs. self

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** serious

**Date of Publication:** 1997

## Summary

Michael MacKenzie receives a Winchester rifle from his grandfather on his birthday. He fires a shot into the air in the nearby woods and the next day learns that a local man, Charlie Ward, was killed by a stray bullet. Michael panics, realizing that he is responsible for the man's death. He soon finds himself in a harrowing battle with his conscience as he and his best friend Joe work to conceal the truth at all costs.

Meanwhile, Jenna Ward attempts to cope with the loss of her father. She struggles to accept his death as she confronts her anger at the killer, fear of vulnerability, resistance to change, and survivor's guilt. Through it all, she is haunted by recurring dreams of a place from her and Michael's childhood, the Ghost Tree.

With the help of a mutual friend, Amy Ruggerio, Michael and Jenna work through their pain. The novel follows each character as they travel their individual paths to personal growth. When these paths converge, Michael and Jenna find themselves in the same place—a place of healing.

## About the Author

**Personal:** Joyce McDonald was born on August 4, 1946, in San Francisco, California, to Eugene William and Mayme Schanbacher. Her father was a police officer, and her mother was a homemaker, but Joyce was a spinner of tales. From the time Joyce was a small child, she began putting stories together to entertain herself and her family. At first, she drew her stories in pictures; then she wrote, illustrated, and told her stories. One of her favorite childhood memories is her mother reading to her before bedtime. Although she initially planned to major in art, she ended up majoring in English at the University of Iowa. She earned her master's degree there and her doctorate at Drew University. She has been married to Hubert "Mac" McDonald, a hardware engineer, since 1980 and resides with him in rural New Jersey.

**Professional:** Joyce McDonald has had a varied career as a secretary, sales clerk, production assistant and editor, lecturer, assistant professor of English, and writing instructor. Her first three books were oriented toward younger children. The first of these, *Mail-Order Kid*, was published in 1988. She followed it with *Homebody* (1991) and *Comfort Creek* (1996), for which she was awarded Children's Book of the Year by the Child Study Children's Book Committee in 1997. The publication of *Swallowing Stones* in 1997 established McDonald as a young-adult novel writer and garnered many honors, such as VOYA Outstanding Title of the Year (1998) and Children's Book Committee/Bank Street College Best Children's Book of the Year (1997). Her other young-

## Vocabulary

fiasco  
furtive  
sneered  
humiliation  
harping  
assault  
muddle  
pariah  
incessant  
intuitively  
vagranacy

2. Analyze and explain Michael's reasons for visiting Amy. *(Answers will vary, but Michael's primary reason for visiting Amy is to have a chance to apologize to her face-to-face, both for the incident with Darcy and the car accident. His motives for doing so are not selfish, as he has only the dimmest of hopes that he can regain any romantic ground with her. With nothing left to lose, what Michael most desires is for Amy to know that he respects her and never meant to hurt her. It is most important for her to know that he values her as a human being.)*
3. Why is going to talk to Amy such a struggle for Jenna? *(Jenna is afraid of what her friends will think. Amy has a bad reputation, and she is not part of any group or clique. Anyone who associates with Amy is held in disdain. Jenna risks being ostracized for doing what she knows is right.)*
4. Explain the cause of Jenna's panic attacks. How does Jenna come to understand them? *(Jenna's panic attacks are the result of survivor's guilt. On the day her father died, Jenna was on the phone with Jason and refused to call her father in to lunch until her mother had asked three times. Jenna has been blaming herself [and perhaps Jason as well, since he discouraged her from getting off the phone] for her father's death. She cannot help but feel that her father would still be alive if she had immediately obeyed her mother. Amy plants the seeds of understanding when she mentions that the hardest part about getting over her parents' deaths was the survivor's guilt. Later Jason reminds Jenna that she was talking with him on the phone shortly before her father was killed. It is then that Jenna understands she has been associating Jason with the moment her father died.)*
5. What do you think causes Michael's decision to confess his crime? *(Answers will vary, but a number of factors contribute. One is that Michael is simply exhausted—both psychologically and physically. He gets little sleep and lives day to day with tremendous guilt and worry. Another factor is that Michael has become much more empathetic and willing to take responsibility for his actions. He sees what Joe and his parents are going through, and he does not feel he can allow them to bear the burden of his mistakes any longer. He feels a deep connection to Jenna and her pain, and he knows he must give her honesty and closure. Furthermore, Michael wants to show everyone [himself included] that after all the suffering he has endured and caused, he has learned that he has a moral responsibility to others. That said, it seems that the deciding factor for Michael is ultimately the realization that he cannot risk disappointing Amy or allowing her to become an accessory. The author states, "He could face Joe's anger and resentment. And he would face the police when the time came. But Amy, who trusted and believed in him—that was something else" [p. 220]. His love for her is great enough that he decides he cannot let her down.)*
6. Summarize and interpret Jenna's and Michael's final dreams. *(Answers will vary. Jenna dreams she is at the Ghost Tree with her father. When he takes her hand, she inhales the stars and glows with their light. She then notices that she, the stars, and her father are all connected by "shimmering threads" that can never be broken. The dream symbolizes the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. The stars, Jenna, and her father are all connected, all part of the same thing. She and her father can never truly be separated, not even by death, because he is part of her and she is part of him. With this new insight, Jenna shows that she is ready to make peace with her father's death. Michael sees Charlie Ward in his dream, and Charlie good-naturedly slaps Michael on the back and puts his arm around him. Now that Michael has decided to take responsibility for his own actions and confess, he feels that Charlie Ward has forgiven him. Michael, too, is ready to make peace with Mr. Ward's death.)*

7. Why do you think the author chose to write the final chapter in the present tense? *(Answers will vary, but in the final chapter, the two main characters [each so inextricably tied to the trials and changes the other has endured] are finally united, and she likely felt that it gave the writing a heightened sense of urgency. The events in the final chapter are epiphanic and transformative for both characters, and by changing the tense from past to present, the author creates a clear distinction between what the characters were and what they have become.)*
8. Examine the significance of Michael's and Jenna's visit to the Ghost Tree. *(Answers will vary, but the Ghost Tree is a place to confront "personal ghosts" and heal. Jenna and Michael are ready to do this. Jenna faces her father's death and Michael, and Michael faces his role in Mr. Ward's death and Jenna. The Ghost Tree is a place of happy childhood memories for both Jenna and Michael, so it is fitting that in confronting their "personal ghosts" and overcoming death they experience a kind of rebirth. They are now wiser, stronger, more compassionate people.)*

### Supplementary Activities

1. Make a list of the kinds of death reflected in the novel (physical death of Mr. Ward, death of friendships, death of innocence, death of moral character, etc.), and explain how each one moves the plot forward.
2. Write two to three paragraphs about a dream you recently had, and read your description to the class.
3. Add two similes and one metaphor to your list. Examples: **Similes**—"His lifeguard stand was beginning to feel more and more like the witness stand in a courtroom trial" (p. 205); "His mouth was as dry as sand" (p. 214); **Metaphor**—Joe: time bomb (p. 215)

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# *Briarwood Buzz*

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