

Bestselling Author of the Marrow Thieves series

CHERIE DIMALINE

Funeral Songs for Dying Girls



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Winifred has lived in the apartment above the cemetery office with her father, who works in the crematorium, all her life, close to her mother's grave. With her sixteenth birthday only days away, Winifred has settled into a lazy summer schedule, visiting neglected gravesides and nursing a serious crush on her best friend, Jack.

Her habit of wandering the graveyard at all hours has started a rumor that Winterson Cemetery might be haunted. It's welcome news since the crematorium is on the verge of closure and her father's job is being outsourced. Now that the ghost tours have started, Winifred just might be able to save her father's job and the only home she's ever known, not to mention being able to stay close to where her mother is buried.

All she has to do is get help from her con-artist cousin and somehow manage to stop her father from believing his wife has returned from the grave. But when an actual ghost of a teen girl, Phil, who lived and died in the ravine next to the cemetery, starts showing up, Winifred begins to question everything she believes about life and death—and, most importantly, love.

CHERIE DIMALINE is an author from the Georgian Bay Métis Community. Her book *The Marrow Thieves* won the prestigious Kirkus Prize for Young Readers' Literature, the Burt Award for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Young Adult Literature, and the Governor General's Literary Award, among others. *Time* named it one of the 100 Best YA Books of All Time. Its sequel, *Hunting by Stars*, was published in 2021 to great acclaim, and was selected as Book of the Year by NPR, Indigo, and Kobo, and was a *Good Morning America* Buzz Pick, as well as a *Cityline* Book Club Pick for December 2021.

This guide was created by **APRIL WATERS**, a Métis educator from Treaty One territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. She has been a classroom teacher, an Indigenous Education teacher, and school administrator, and provides instructional support and professional development for educators in bringing authentic Indigenous perspectives, culture, and history into their classrooms.


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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. The story centers around Winifred Blight, a teenage girl in Toronto, Ontario. What do we learn about Winifred? What is she like?
 2. Throughout the book we see Winifred doing random skip counting and math equations with numbers she sees around her. Why do you think she does this? Does this remind you of anything else?
 3. Winifred struggles with making and keeping friends. How do the other kids in her community view her? Discuss the significance of her friendship with Jack. Why do you think they connected so easily?
 4. Describe Winifred's cousin Penny and their relationship.
 5. Aunt Roberta has a significant impact on Winifred and how she views the world and herself. Who is Aunt Roberta? Does she have a positive or negative influence on her?
 6. Winifred's mother was Métis, but throughout the book Winifred questions her Indigenous roots. On page 110, she says, "This split identity was why I didn't feel confident enough to sit in one definition." What does she learn? How does she begin to connect with her family history and learn about who she is?
 7. Winifred meets Phil on the grounds of the cemetery. Who is Phil? Describe how Winifred feels about her. Do you believe in ghosts?
 8. Winifred becomes the victim of some online bullying after Jack tells a friend about her feelings and actions toward him. The friend shares this information on social media, and it spirals out of control. How does Winifred deal with this? How would you handle a situation like this?
 9. At different points throughout the story, Phil is the narrator and tells the story of her life and eventual death. She talks about how she came out to her mother. How did her mother react?
 10. Thomas Blight, Winifred's father, struggles throughout the story with the death of his wife. How does he deal with the loss? How does this behavior affect his daughter? If you were in Thomas' shoes, how would you feel?
 11. Winifred comes up with a plan to end the ghost tours to keep Phil safe. What is her plan? How does it unfold?
 12. At the end of the book, Winifred and her father decide to move on to make space for a new life. She says that she has to "leave something here where it belongs." (p.268) What does Winifred leave behind and why?
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FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. On page 113, Phil states, “This is important. I need you to remember this: I was loved. I was profoundly and fully loved. This is critical, because people like to tell a version of stories where we were born to be neglected or forgotten or hurt.” Why do you think the author included this statement? Through the life and death of Phil, Cherie Dimaline explores the topic of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). Explore this topic through the many stories of these women. Share what you learn about it with your school and community.
2. Imagine you are Chess Isaacs, the creator of the ghost tours company, Toronto Haunted Ghost Tours. Create a poster or other form of advertisement for your company, including the latest feature at Winterson Cemetery. Be sure to be creative so that you can “sell” it to your customers!
3. Winifred deals with loss and grief throughout the book—the deaths of her mother, her Aunt Roberta, her dog, and the loss of friendships. Grief is a very real emotion and challenge to cope with, and many move through it with creative activities such as art, music, and writing. Explore various works on grief and present one of your choosing to your class. What are your thoughts on the different works shared by your class?
4. There are many beautiful, impactful, thought-provoking lines written by Cherie Dimaline throughout the story. Place various quotes from the story around your classroom and have students go on a “gallery walk,” discussing the meaning behind them. Some examples you could use:
“I’d never felt locked up until Roberta told me you could be unlocked.” (p.62)
“Rain always felt like a low conversation. Snow was a whisper, but rain was a fistful of voices negotiating a dozen languages at the same time.” (p.96)
“Sometimes the best thing to sail by isn’t the North Star. Sometimes it’s by your own delusions.” (p.129)
“Even in death, we do the work of being found.” (p.147)
“Love is want. It’s loss. It’s everything.” (p.227)
5. Penny tries to market and sell a colonized version of her culture to non-Indigenous people on the ghost tour, and Winifred is horrified that she would “exploit her own culture.” Explore the idea of cultural appropriation. What pieces of Indigenous cultures do you typically see appropriated and marketed to non-Indigenous people? Hold a classroom debate exploring the sides of the discussion—is cultural appropriation harmful, or are people too sensitive?

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