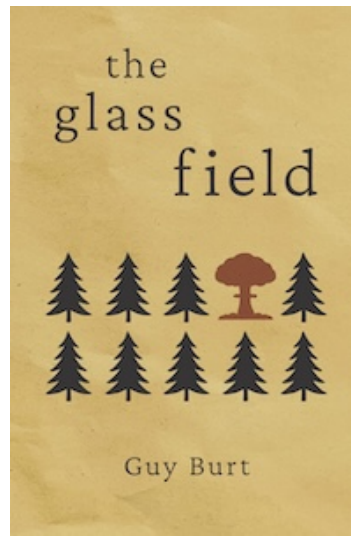


THE GLASS FIELD

Guy Burt

Reading Notes



SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The Glass Field follows Scott, a thoughtful fifteen-year-old boy haunted by the recent death of his mother, and Jodie, a brilliant but isolated girl who struggles with self-harm, during the tense summer of 1986 at the height of the Cold War. Living near a secret military facility connected to the U.S. 'Star Wars' defence programme, the two teenagers form an unlikely bond built around shared fears of catastrophe. As they grow closer, they decide to prepare for the worst and create their own plan to survive a nuclear war.

As the book progresses, that plan becomes a way for them to survive the personal crises that are already engulfing them. In the strange space between imagination and reality, they confront grief, loneliness, and their growing feelings for each other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Burt published three novels in the 1990s before moving primarily into screenwriting. *The Glass Field* marks his return to fiction after twenty-five years, and a shift toward literary fiction focused on adolescence, grief and psychological interiority.

His screenwriting credits include *The Bletchley Circle*, *The Borgias* and, *Harriet's Army*. His screen projects have won two BAFTAs.

MAIN THEMES OF THE NOVEL

1) Personal grief and isolation displaced into bigger fears

When we first meet Scott, he is still struggling to process the death of his mother in a car accident eight months earlier. It quickly becomes clear that his father is unable to engage, and Scott is trying desperately to manage his grief alone. His fixation on nuclear war feels partly rational, given the Cold War setting, but is also clearly a reaction to his mother's death: Scott sees apocalypse around every corner because he has already learned that cataclysm can come at any moment, 'out of a clear blue sky'.

Jodie's attempts to navigate her own emotionally abusive family situation and her total isolation from her peers manifest in self-harm: a desperate reaction that gives her some momentary illusion of control over her life and her body. When she meets Scott, and starts to believe that his nuclear fear is grounded in reality, it gives her a focus for her pain – something she can try to act on.

A central theme of the novel is how global fears give shape to more personal ones, and how apocalypse can be internal rather than external.

2) Reality, imagination and the stories we use to survive

The novel is full of imagined worlds and simulations: the *Dispersal* computer game, post-apocalyptic pulp novels on Scott's shelves, *Judge Dredd* comics, Cold War scenarios. When Jodie and Scott discover the bunker on the heath, and start prepping it for survival, it too becomes a kind of shared fiction – a story they're both creating and contributing to.

As the novel progresses, this 'shared fiction' takes a sharp turn. The latter chapters of the novel show Scott and Jodie entering a kind of suspension of disbelief whereby they behave as if a nuclear war has taken place. Whether this is genuine belief or a shared, negotiated fantasy is left ambiguous in the text. What seems to matter most is that they commit to this story together.

3) Seeing, being seen, the body and survival

Throughout the novel, seeing and being seen, reflection, glass and the nature of bodies are motifs that recur. Scott first sees Jodie through smoked, soundproof glass and mistakes her for a boy. Jodie is terrified of being seen and mocked in public. Scott sleepwalks naked and wakes mortified at the possibility of having been seen. Jodie conceals from view her scars and the sites of her self-harm, and identifies with the comic-book character of Anderson, a woman encased in plastic – visible but immobilised.

The gradual shift in both Scott's and Jodie's attitudes to being seen – most particularly by each other – becomes central to the book.

OPENING 'BIG PICTURE' QUESTIONS

- **Which character did you feel closer to while reading: Scott or Jodie?**
Did that change as the book went on, and if so, why?
- **Why do you think the novel uses adolescent protagonists?**
Adolescent protagonists are rare in adult literary fiction. Does using young characters bring any advantages to a novel like this? Why do you think the author chose to explore this territory through this particular lens? Could the book be written with adult characters?
- **Was there a particular moment or scene that really stuck with you after finishing the book?**
Something unsettling, moving, funny or surprising?
- **What purpose does the bunker really serve?**
On the face of it, it's a place to survive nuclear war. What does its purpose become, and to what extent do you think the teens are aware of its shift in meaning for them?
- **Do you think the final chapters are delusion, or shared fantasy?**
The novel is ambiguous here. One way to read the book is that Scott and Jodie both understand, at some level, that a war hasn't really happened; but that they choose to live inside the story regardless. Another reading is that they genuinely believe it. Which interpretation feels right to you?

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Scott's nuclear fear is very logical and well-researched.**
But do you think it's really about the bomb, or about losing his mother? Does the novel nudge us one way or the other on this?
- **The novel treats Jodie's self-harm very directly, but never gives us answers.**
Does that feel honest to you? Difficult to read? Necessary? Could the novel have been written without showing us this?
- **Scott is surprisingly unkind when he forces Jodie to come to the Music Box in Chapter 5.**
Did this damage your sympathy for him? Why does he do it? Does he realise *how* unkind he's being? When Jodie thinks *Why has he brought her here?*, what would be your answer?
- **The novel begins from Scott's perspective, then switches to Jodie's; then alternates.**
Were you relieved when Chapter 2 puts us in Jodie's head instead of Scott's? Did Chapter 1 lead you to expect that the novel would be 'Scott's book'? If you had to say, by the end, whose book did you feel it was?
- **Jodie spends much of the book believing nobody could want her.**
What moments begin to shift that belief for her?
- **What is the purpose of the dinner party sequence in Chapter 13?**

This is a long sequence in a surprisingly distinct tone from what's gone before. Why is it here, at the midpoint of the book? What does it show us – about Scott, about Jodie, about family and memory?

- **The scene between Leah and Scott inverts the usual direction of consent.**
We're used to scenes in fiction where girls are pressured for sex. Here, Scott is the one who resists and says no, despite being aroused. Did this feel realistic? What is the novel showing us in this scene? How is Leah, as a character, used in the book, and what were your reactions to her?
- **Jodie overhears a painful secret about Scott's parents.**
In the bunker, she tells him part of what she heard; but only part. Having said that she doesn't want any secrets between them, she keeps this secret from him. Is she right not to tell him the whole truth? What would you have done?
- **The book through a feminist lens.**
Although the novel starts with Scott, Jodie is given more or less equal interiority as the novel progresses. But is her purpose in the book to serve Scott's character development? Or is she fully realised as a character in her own right?
- **Towards the end of the bunker sequence, we enter a 'dream within a dream'.**
The story Scott and Jodie create between them, of life after the apocalypse, has a strikingly different tone and delivery to the rest of the book. What is the author doing here? Did you find it convincing, or did it make the story feel less grounded?
- **The intimacy scenes in the bunker are unusually frank about bodies and insecurity.**
Did those scenes feel tender, uncomfortable, realistic, or something else?
- **By the end of the book, have Scott and Jodie actually changed?**
Or have they just had a moment together before the world closes back in on them? If you feel they have changed, in what ways, and how much? The last line of the book asks a direct question. How do you think they should answer it?

SOME QUESTIONS ON WRITING CRAFT

- **The style of the novel makes some bold choices.**
Present tense delivery; close third-person delivery; no speech marks for dialogue... how did these choices affect your read? Did they feel like they were used for a reason, and if so, why? Perhaps most centrally, what is gained by writing in the present tense rather than the past – particularly for a novel like this which is clearly set in a specific historical moment?
- **The story generally stays very close to Scott or Jodie's perspective.**
We're almost always inside one of their heads, seeing the world exactly as they do. Did that closeness make the story feel more intense or personal to you? Did you feel the Jodie sections had a discernibly different 'voice' to the Scott sections, and if so, how was this achieved in the writing?
- **The writing style in general is quite bare.**
There is very little lyrical description; sentences are usually declarative and simple. But there are some exceptions to this – for example, in the dinner party sequence. How did you find these variations in writing style? And did the style overall work for you?
- **At some points, the style fragments entirely.**
Most notably, in Chapter 17, when Jodie's full-blown emotional dissociation at seeing the missiles is rendered in fractured prose on the page: incomplete sentences, descriptions that are

clearly not real. Did you find this effective? How else might the author have attempted to portray this moment of crisis?

- **The novel is sometimes very focused on small details.**

Kitchen sounds; the nape of someone's neck; the smell of the air; grass stains etc. Did those details make the world feel vivid and real to you, or did you sometimes feel the story was moving too slowly because of them? What do you think the author intended by including these small details?

TRIVIA FACTS

- The sequence in which Scott watches fire crews and HazMat-suited figures 'like spacemen from a B-movie' approach is taken from a real incident when Guy Burt was fifteen and working at an estate gardening job at a pharmaceutical research laboratory.
- Camwell is a thinly-disguised fictional version of Camberley, where he grew up. The Army Surplus store, the biker bar, and other places on the London Road are all drawn from life.
- Jodie's geeky computer fixation is also autobiographical. Burt has a longstanding interest in computers, and had his name credited on a computer game (*Ricochet*, published in 1989 for the BBC B micro, for which he designed graphics) before he had it on a novel.
- The Kirtland incident actually happened (as did all the other nuclear accidents and near-misses described in the book).

More information and contact details can be found at

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