



Glasgow Boys

Margaret McDonald

This is Lit Book Club Discussion Guide



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About this guide

This guide has been created to help you run a book club with your students.

The aim is to help you guide their reading as well as encourage discussion and enjoyment! The purpose of the club is to move away from the 'formal' assessment for GCSE and just read the book through an inquiring and critical lens.

As *Glasgow Boys* is a popular text for young adults, there are many excellent pre-existing guides available. This guide will refer closely to these and provide links and page numbers for you to refer to.

We are extremely grateful to the English and Media Centre, Faber & Faber and the Scottish Book Trust for access to their guides.

The 3 main guides you may want to print off before reading the book are:

- The Carnegies/EMC guide [here](#)
- Faber & Faber discussion guide [here](#)
- Scottish Book Club Trust: [here](#)

About the book and author

Glasgow Boys was written by Margaret McDonald and published in 2024.

It was McDonald's debut novel and won the Carnegie prize in June 2025.

Please note: This book covers some sensitive issues including suicide, self-harm, strong language, homophobic abuse and violence. It is advised that teachers read the book before sharing with students. There is also mention of PTSD, drug taking and child abuse.

Read this warning to students so they are aware that these are elements which will come up as they are reading.

Possible activities:

1. Encourage students to read about the author and her achievements. The BBC website featured an interesting interview [here](#). Ask students to read this and think about the author's background and life experiences. Does this make them more intrigued to read the book?
2. The Carnegie prize was established in 1936 and is awarded every year. It is a prestigious award given for literature for children and young people. The judges are always librarians who are members of the Youth libraries group. Ask students if reading an 'award winning book' alters their expectations. Do they expect to enjoy it more? Or does it not make a difference?
3. The book focuses on the lives and experiences of two boys, Finlay and Banjo, who have grown up in care. Ask students to read the summaries of the books in Appendix 1 of this guide. Which one do they think is more appealing and why? Which one helps them to understand the main themes and what is going to happen in the book?
4. Now students know a little more about the book and the author, does this make them feel ready to read the book? Is it important to know these things before you start reading? Ask them to think about what they look at when they are choosing which book to select - how do they decide?

Before Reading

Take some time to talk to your students about the main themes of the book and look at the title/cover to get some context.

Possible activities:

1. A good starter activity can be to ask students to look at the cover of the book and the title. The Faber & Faber guide has some interesting activities focusing on the cover of the book, the title and the use of Scottish dialect which you may want to investigate before they start reading. [F&F guide p.2](#)
2. The EMC guide also has some starter extracts and questions to ask which will help your students to get a feel for the novel and the dialogue. [EMC guide pp.2-3](#)
3. You may also want to introduce students to the dialect guide at the back of the Faber edition. Ensure that they know it is there to help with their understanding of the novel and to not be put off or dissuaded from reading as there may be words they do not recognise.

Reading the book

This is obviously the main activity and your role is to facilitate the reading as and when you feel you need to. We want students to read at their own pace and enjoy the book away from the 'shackles' of GCSE, but also to become more active readers and be able to pick up on themes, ask questions and discuss the book with others.

Possible ways to approach the text and discussing the text in a group setting

1. The EMC guide has an excellent section by section guide to the book. It breaks it down into manageable chunks with questions to ask to help the students unpick the characters and themes. You may want to give these questions to the students at the start of each book club session so they have something to discuss. [EMC guide pp.2-4](#)
2. If you would prefer something more open-ended and less directed, the Faber & Faber guide has some more general reading questions which can be asked at certain points or at the end of the book. [F&F guide pp.4-5](#)
3. Alternatively, the Scottish Book Trust has a printable discussion guide with some main areas of discussion which you may want to hand out to students before they start reading. [Scottish Book Trust p.28](#)

After Reading

Although these activities have been placed in this area of the guide, you may want to introduce some of the tables around capturing themes and character progression before students start reading to allow them to take notes. However, you may feel that this will distract them from enjoying the process of reading and would prefer to leave this until after they have read the book for the first time.

Even though some of these after reading activities may feel a little like GCSE in terms of thinking about themes/characters etc, students do not need to think about it in terms of assessment objectives! This is just to help them discuss the main areas of the book and why these are important to the plot, character development and how they made them feel.

Encourage students to talk about what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy about the book. They can be honest and admit that it wasn't something they enjoyed if they didn't - everyone has different literary tastes and this is part of reading for pleasure. Explain how they are not going to think every book they read is amazing but there is likely to be at least something which touched them or made them think even if the overall story or theme wasn't really something they happen to enjoy. Here you may want to ask them about what books/genres they might enjoy reading next. Would they like to read more like this book or move onto something completely different?

Possible activities:

1. There are some great activities in the EMC guide asking students for their initial thoughts around the text and asking them questions about the main themes and characters. There is even an exercise around recommending this for the GCSE which you might like to try with students! [EMC guide pp.5-6](#)
2. You may also want to come back to the synopsis at the back of this guide and ask students to read them again to see how well they 'match' the book and its content now they have read it. Perhaps they could even write one of their own?
3. The Faber & Faber guide has a useful table with lots of different themes listed for students to add examples. This could be used as part of discussion guide at the end of the novel or be given to students to fill out as they go along. [F&F guide p.3](#)

Writing a review

After students have finished reading and discussing the text, ask them to create a short review to share with Pearson. Encourage students to be creative in how they respond to the book. The purpose of the review is to share personal reactions, and it doesn't need to be a formal piece of writing. Students should feel free to focus on what stood out to them, how the book made them feel, and whether they would recommend it to someone else.

Reviews could take a variety of formats, for example:

- chat or message-style conversation with a friend, talking about the book and why they would (or wouldn't) recommend it
- a short voice note or podcast-style discussion
- video review or informal vlog
- social media-style post or thread
- or a traditional written review, if they prefer

Whichever format they choose, the emphasis should be on honest responses and clear communication of ideas, rather than length, technical accuracy, or formality. Students do not have to be complimentary if they did not enjoy the book — thoughtful disagreement and differing opinions are part of meaningful reading and discussion.

Possible activities for writing a review:

1. There are some excellent resources in the EMC guide to help students with this. Encourage them to read the examples in the guide and to think about how they would like to structure their own. [EMC guide pp.7-8](#)
2. Ask students to read some different styles of reviews such as the ones here
 - a. [Strathclyde Telegraph](#)
 - b. [Just Imagine](#)
 - c. [LoveReading4Kids](#)
 - d. [Storygraph](#)
 - e. [Goodreads](#)

Do they agree with the views expressed here? Encourage students to look at some of the different star ratings on examples in d and e and think about why people may have opposing views to them about the book? Can they see why some may love the book and others don't?

3. There are some excellent GCSE English Language resources around writing a review and how to structure it on the BBC website which you may want to use with students. Or they can use the examples above to help them think about the style and the tone they want to adopt for their review. [BBC Bitesize](#)

Appendix 1

Summaries of Glasgow Boys

1. [Scottish Book Trust guide p.6](#)

Glasgow Boys by Margaret McDonald

- **Mid to upper secondary (Age 13+)**
- **Themes: Friendship, family, care, university, coming of age**

This split narrative novel follows Finlay and Banjo, two boys who both grew up in the care system. Finlay is studying nursing at Glasgow university, Banjo is finding his way between school, foster parents and a job at a café. Whilst both their futures offer them hope, they still have to process the emotional impact of their past.

2. [Faber & Faber website and back cover](#)

Summary

Two boys can't remember the last time they had a hug.

Meet Finlay. He's studying for his nursing degree at Glasgow University, against all the odds. But coming straight from care means he has no support network.

How can he write essays, find paid work and NOT fall for the beautiful boy at uni, when he's struggling to even feed himself?

Meet Banjo. He's trying to settle in with his new foster family and finish high school. But he can't forget all that has happened, and his anger and fear keep boiling over.

How can he hold on to the one good person in his life, when his outbursts keep threatening his already uncertain future?

Can Finlay and Banjo let go of the past before it drags them under?

3. Google AI - AI Overview

Glasgow Boys by Margaret McDonald (2024) is a contemporary YA novel exploring young working-class masculinity and care experience. The story follows 18-year-old nursing student Finlay and 17-year-old foster kid Banjo, former close friends from a care home who have not spoken in three years, as they navigate traumatic pasts and try to build hopeful futures.

Key Details and Plot Points:

Characters: Finlay (university nursing student, struggling alone) and Banjo (high schooler, managing anger issues and a foster family).

Theme: Deals with the lasting impact of the care system, trauma, the need for forgiveness, and the search for identity.

Setting: Modern-day Glasgow, Scotland.

Publication: Released by Faber & Faber in May 2024, ~350 pages.

Reception: Highly praised as an emotional, and heartfelt, debut novel.

The narrative highlights the boys' desperate need to move past their shared, fractured history to find personal redemption.