Bridge to Terabithia Jigsaw Information

1. Setting

Lark Creek and Terabithia in the 1970s

The characters all live in a small town called Lark Creek and, except for when Jess goes to Washington, D.C., with Miss Edmunds, all the action takes place there. Lark Creek is a small, almost backward town in Virginia where people are slow to accept change and frown on difference. They don't like hippies or girls who wear pants. People live on farms, work hard, and struggle. They don't have many resources and people, even children, are supposed to make do with the little they've got.

That's how Terabithia is – Leslie and Jess making do with what they've got. They've got a rope swing, a creek, a patch of forest, and a grove, which we know doesn't sound like much. Jess and Leslie have something worth so much more than what the other characters in the book possess – real, exciting imagination, imagination so powerful that it almost seems like magic. Magic turns the creek into a boundary between worlds, the grove into a sacred place, a puppy into a prince, and two fifth graders into a king and queen. We don't see that much of Terabithia, but we know it's a setting for court ceremonies, battles, and imagination.

1. Plot (Part 1)

## Initial Situation

### **Jess wants to be the fastest kid in the fifth grade.**

In the beginning of the book, we meet Jess, learn about Lark Creek, and figure out a little bit about his family life. We see that Jess isn't understood by his family, doesn't have any real friends, and doesn't even like school very much. So, he takes all the feelings he has about loneliness or being left out, or wanting something more for himself, and puts them into the goal of training to become the fastest runner in his grade. Being the fastest runner will give him identity, glory, and purpose. It's the most exciting and important thing in his life.

## Conflict

### **Jess doesn't like Leslie at first, but they end up becoming the best of friends.**

Even though Jess and Leslie are both looking for friends, and they've just become neighbours, Jess doesn't start out thinking much of. After all, she's a girl, and at the beginning of the book his understanding of friendship is limited by gender roles. Yet, even though he barely knows Leslie, he stands up for her when she wants to run in the boys' race. He doesn't even know why he does so, and kind of regrets it when she beats the pants off everybody else. On just her first day at school, she's ruined his dream of being the fastest runner. Even though Jesse doesn’t want to be Leslie’s friend, she keeps trying and eventually she wins Jess over. By losing the title of fastest runner, Jess gains a surprising new friend.

## Complication

### **Jess and Leslie battle with Janice Avery.**

Jess and Leslie's friendship is strengthened by their two encounters with Janice Avery, the seventh grade bully. First, Janice takes May Belle's Twinkies. Since Jess can't try to beat Janice up for revenge, he and Leslie make a plan to write her a fake love letter and embarrass her. They use creativity (synergize!) to achieve a better end result. Later, though, when Leslie finds Janice crying in a bathroom, she and Jess find they've grown in compassion and make an attempt to comfort the former bully. Together they learn that even enemies should be treated with dignity.

## Plot (Part 2)

## Climax

### **Jess deserts Terabithia for a day with Miss Edmunds, only to return to some terrible news.**

Jess is thrilled beyond expectation when Miss Edmunds offers to take him out for a special day. He's so taken aback that he forgets about his worry that it wouldn't have been safe to go to Terabithia that day. Throughout his time with Miss Edmunds, he thinks about how Leslie would react and how she would advise him in different situations. Ironically, on his way home he thinks that the day was so great it would be worth any sacrifice. Little does he know that it will cost him something tremendous. When he returns, he learns that Leslie has died.

## Falling Action (Denouement)

### **Jess and Leslie's family grieve and try to make sense of their loss.**

At first Jess can't believe his friend has died – he refuses to process the information. He tries to deny it when people tell him, and then starts acting like nothing happened. He even dreams that her death was another, worse dream, and tries to talk to her and tell her about the magical day he had – a day that will forever be tainted. It's not until he throws Leslie's gift to him away that he begins to realize she's actually gone and is finally able to cry.

Jess is still struggling to process his grief when he admits to his father his worry Leslie will go to hell, and his dad reassures him that their God wouldn't do that. What helps Jess most might be talking to his teacher Mrs. Myers, who reminds him that he has the power of memory and can keep Leslie with him, in a way, by honoring her memory and thinking about her. By observing her grief, he learns about human nature and realizes just how much he learned from Leslie after all.

## Conclusion

### **Jess builds a bridge to Terabithia.**

At the end of the book, Jess returns to Terabithia and has to save his sister's life when May Belle tries to follow him. Using lumber given to him by Leslie's parents, Jess is inspired to build a bridge across to Terabithia, so that both he and May Belle can get there safely. While we're sure he wishes they'd built the bridge months earlier, so Leslie would have been safe, the fact that he builds it after her death means that he still values Terabithia and thinks it's important to keep going there, rather than staying away after the tragedy. Leslie would have wanted it that way.

## Characters

Jesse Aarons

The first thing we learn about Jess is his ambition to be "the best runner of the fourth and fifth grades" (4.2) and that's what drives him for the first several chapters of the book – being the fastest and best runner. It's something he can improve if he works really hard, that will make people proud of him, that's totally accepted in his society, and that will be seen as masculine – all pretty important things for a kid who feels like a bit of an outcast. But while he might have some ability, Jess just isn't naturally the fastest runner: he has to work really hard at it. When Leslie comes along, she easily beats him and all the others, and for all we know she never trained at it.

Jess's other, more secret ambition is to become a good artist. He has to draw because he can't help it. His teacher Miss Edmunds encourages him and his father disapproves but with Leslie in his life, Jess starts to draw and to draw better. As he's talking with his new friend, "he yearned to reach out and capture the quivering life about him [but] when he tried, it slipped past his fingertips, leaving a dry fossil upon the page" (4.111). Leslie's the one who helps him see "the poetry of the trees" (4.111). With her in his life, he's able to imagine a career as an artist, and to start to think about a future outside of Lark Creek and beyond his parents' expectations.

Jess's friendship with Leslie changes him tremendously. She really teaches him to be more courageous, more imaginative, and more thoughtful. Because he has her in his life, he can become who he wants to be. He "need[s] to give her something" (6.6). His friendship with her makes up for the things that are lacking in his family life (6.23), and, just as she would be alienated without him, he would be "lonesome" without her. He's "able to be Leslie's one whole friend in the world as she [i]s his" (7.112).

When Leslie is abruptly taken from him, Jess is completely devastated. He goes through several stages of grief, including blaming her for helping him open his mind like that:

*She had tricked him. She had made him leave his old self behind and come into her world, and then before he was really at home in it but too late to go back, she had left him stranded there.* (12.17). It's true that she did leave him there far too early. There was more she could teach him, and more he could teach her. The world is a lesser place without Leslie in it, but Jess is richer for having known her at all.

Leslie Burke

More than anything, Leslie's defined by her imagination and sense of adventure. She's open and ready for anything: ready to move to a new town and make new friends, to try new things, to create something where nothing existed before. Even though moving to Lark Creek was hard on her, she wanted to do it to support her parents.

Because of her reading and the way she was brought up, Leslie is able to use her imagination and creativity (with the strength of her friendship with Jess) to get outside of Lark Creek. Terabithia is her idea because she's the one who sees magic in the ordinary, sees Terabithia where there's just a forest, and is the one who helps Jess see those things too.

We know what Jess's ambitions are, but we don't really know Leslie's. In fact, we never learn as much about her as we do about Jess, or about what Jess thinks about her. We do know she loves stories – reading them, telling them, and making them up. The girl's curious, she genuinely wants to know things, and she's a "beautiful" (3.87), naturally fast runner. But we don't really know what she wants to be when she grows up, or what drives her. She's had a hard time in Lark Creek, with only "one and one-half friends," Jess and Janice (7.111). In fact, without Jess, we can bet her year in Lark Creek would've been pretty miserable. Her father later thanks Jess "for being such a wonderful friend to her" (12.13), and tells him "she loved [him]" (12.13).

Jess always thinks of Leslie as full of courage when he is afraid. When he asks her if she's frightened of Janice Avery, it's mainly because the thought of her getting frightened is incredible: "he didn't mean it in a daring way, he was just dumbfounded by the idea of Leslie being scared" (7.70). There are two things to take from this. First, Jess has important things to teach Leslie too, like feeling compassion for scary enemies or "predators." He helps her to stretch her mind just as she stretched his. Second, sometimes being too brave can be foolish or tragic. Because Leslie doesn't feel or recognize fear when the creek to Terabithia is overfilling with rushing water, she makes the overconfident leap of trying to cross it by herself.

Leslie changes Jess's life, there's no question about that. Yet even when she's gone, she's still present for Jess and is still helping him grow into a better, more noble person – a person worthy of Terabithia:

*It was Leslie who had taken him from the cow pasture into Terabithia and turned him into a king. […] hadn't Leslie, even in Terabithia, tried to push back the walls of his mind and make him see beyond to the shining world – huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile?* (13.59)

Leslie's gift was that she knew that "shining world," in all its terror and glory, joy and heartbreak, was out there, waiting for them, and she was able to "make [Jess] see beyond to" it. We can only imagine what she herself saw and what else she would have been able to learn, and to teach, had she lived.

May Belle

May Belle is the only one of Jess's siblings that he has real affection for or tolerates. In turn, she "worship[s him]" (1.8). She's as lonely as Jess is, and also requires a friend: "I need somebody to play with," she tells Jess early on (2.4). But while she often looks to Jess to provide that friendship, for most of the book he's just not that interested, seeing her as a little squirt and preferring to go to Terabithia with Leslie. (For more on how she affects his friendship dynamic with Leslie, see the section "Character Roles.")

After Leslie dies, May Belle is still there for Jess. No one listens to her when she says Jess wasn't in danger with Leslie, and she's the only one who worries about him being lonely, telling him, "I just wanted to find you, so you wouldn't be so lonesome" (13.35). When she tries to follow him into Terabithia and gets stuck on the makeshift, tree branch bridge – and really puts her life in jeopardy – saving her is something that brings Jess back to himself and helps him realize more important lessons Leslie taught him. May Belle shows Jess he's still loved and needed even after Leslie's gone, and makes him see he can still get to Terabithia. It seems like he makes a real, proper bridge across to Terabithia so that May Belle can go there with him too. In teaching her to see Terabithia for herself, he's reminding himself of how to see it as well.

Janice Avery

Janice is the big seventh grade bully, the terror of the bus ride and the littler kids. She's big and mean, and at the beginning of the book we don't have much sympathy for the girl. Jess knows how to keep his head down and stay out of Janice's way, but kids as little as May Belle haven't learned that yet. Janice does things like steal little kids' Twinkies and enforce a caste policy on the school bus, where she has a special seat that nobody else can sit in.

It seems admirable and sneaky of Jess and Leslie to write a fake love letter to embarrass Janice when she's mean to May Belle, since they can't beat her up in a physical fight. It's a clever way of dealing with a problem that has to be dealt with: if Jess doesn't try to get back at Janice, he'll lose May Belle's respect.

But they, and we, feel badly for Janice afterwards. We learn later in the book that Janice's bullying comes from a darker place, and is really an example of someone perpetuating a cycle of abuse. In other words, because her father beats her up so badly, the only thing she knows how to do is be mean to other, weaker people. Leslie explains to Jess that Janice's father "really beats her. The kind of beatings they take people to jail for in Arlington" (7.85-87). What gets Janice is not the abuse – as if that's not bad enough – but the fact that her friend blabbed about it and everybody at school knows. That embarrasses her at a totally different level than the silly letter Jess and Leslie wrote.

## Themes

1. Friendship

Friendship is the most important kind of relationship in *Bridge to Terabithia*: friends are the family that you get to choose for yourself. The most evolved characters – Jess, Leslie, May Belle – are the ones who are concerned with finding and making friends. And not just any friends. We're talking good friends – the kind who understand and support you, but also help you grow and continue to evolve. In the best friendships, like Jess and Leslie's, the bond they share strengthens as both people involve. They each have things to teach the other, they encourage each other, and they believe in each other. Friendship means helping people access and become open to a greater world than the one they knew before.

1. Courage

Courage takes many forms in *Bridge to Terabithia*, whether it's standing up for girls' rights to run with the boys, crossing a rushing creek in the pouring rain, getting revenge on a bully, or comforting that bully. It's also about admitting when something scares you, knowing when to wait instead of fight, and learning that acknowledging or facing your fear is just as brave as not feeling fear in the first place. There are always going to be scary events and encounters, but what matters is how you treat others, not how strong or weak you might feel inside.

1. Transformation (Change)

Where does the power of transformation come – from the inside or the outside? In *Bridge to Terabithia*, it's both. Through their friendship, both Jess and Leslie are changed for the better. Jess becomes more imaginative, and Leslie becomes more compassionate. They each teach the other about becoming a better person. But becoming a better person also comes from within. In teaching Leslie compassion, Jess strengthens his own capability for it, and in leading Jess into Terabithia, Leslie expands the boundaries of that realm for herself. They learn to see other people as their friend sees them, and make a more ordinary kind of transformative magic for themselves by imagining Terabithia.