

# The Blackhouse

## Reading Group or Book Club Questions for Discussion

***(NB contains spoilers for those who haven't read the book)***

1) The story unfolds through two threads.

The first thread describes Fin in third person as he returns to the island and proceeds through his investigation; the second thread is written in first person from Fin's perspective as the story of his childhood unfolds.

When we step inside Fin's head, are we stepping back in time to be with Fin the child? Or are we hearing the thoughts and memories as recalled by Fin the adult, looking back?

2) When Fin's parents are killed he says:

*"It occurred to me, sitting there, that one day I would die too. It was not something I had ever thought about before, and it nudged up against my grief for space in my little locker of horrors. But you can't dwell on the thought of your own death for long, and very soon I banished it altogether by deciding that since I was only eight it was a very long way off, and I would deal with it only when I had to."*

It becomes clear that Fin has coped with all the painful events in his life in the past by putting them in his "little locker of horrors".

How does the recent death of his child in a road accident affect him? How does he deal with it? Is he managing successfully to get back to work?

3) The trip back to the island prompts Fin to recall several episodes from his childhood and youth, memories that had long been buried.

He is a man with many faults, who has done things he isn't proud of.

How much does our knowledge of Fin's past change how we judge his actions and behaviour?

4) The young Donald Murray always had a strong sense of right and wrong, coming to the aid of the young Fin, and in later life displays the same stubborn confidence in his own moral code as the minister.

Do the children show signs of the adults they will turn into?

How do their experiences while growing up shape them?

Could Artair, Marsaili, Fin and Donald have changed the paths of their lives, or did their histories plot the path of their futures?

5) The guga hunt is based on a real event which takes place every August when twelve men go to an island which is little more than a rock to live for 2 weeks to kill 2,000 young gannets.

Is it important that it is based on reality?

Would it make any difference if it had been entirely fictional?

Does it affect the impact or the atmosphere knowing that it is based on fact?

6) Chapter 14, 111, begins:

*"A sense that they had all wasted their lives, that they had somehow missed their chances through stupidity or neglect, lay heavy on his shoulders, pulling him down into deep dejection."*

Childhood with its innocence and dreams is also shown as a time when the young are unaware of the consequences of their actions.

Fin looks back with many regrets about his thoughtlessness, the bad choices that he has made, and the hurt he has caused.

Should he have known better?

Could he have prevented himself from making mistakes?

7) Ch 14, 111, continues with:

*"His mood was not helped by the bruising clouds gathering themselves on the Minch, nor by the Arctic breath carried on the stiffening breeze."*

and its first paragraph ends with...

*"He got out of the car and stood breathing deeply, facing into the wind, the sound of the sea breaking on the pebble beach below."*

How important is the location to the book?

The insular community, the landscape with its wild cliffs and beaches, and the weather whipping up wind and rain, and wild seas. What effect does the setting have on the characters, their actions and lives?

8) Reviews of the book mention crime fiction, novels, and quality of writing, e.g....

*"Just when we think we've seen it all, along comes Peter May's Blackhouse to remind us that terms like unique and cutting edge still belong in the crime novel lexicon. In addition to being a great story, this book is probably like nothing you have read before."* **The Big Thrill (Magazine of the International Thriller Writers Association)**

*"A chilling setting for a gripping novel... impressive writing"*

**The Times**

*"A beautifully written, haunting and powerful examination of the darkness of men's souls and how hard it can be to bury the past, The Blackhouse is also an outstanding page-turning murder mystery"*

**The Independent**

How much is "The Blackhouse" a crime book or thriller, and how much is it a novel?

Is "genre" important?

Is there a difference between crime writing and literature, or should there be?