



# Curriculum Connections

## *The Silence of Bones*

by June Hur

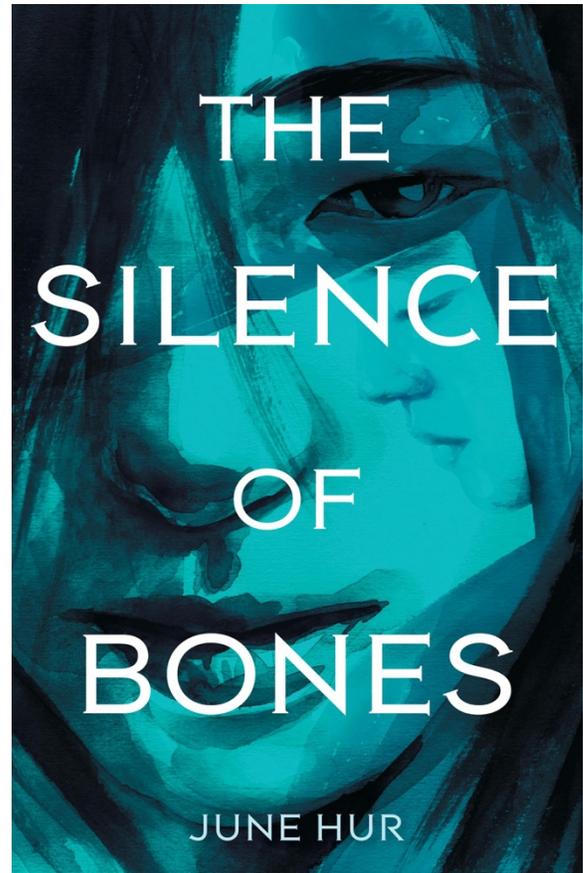
Macmillan Publishing, 2020

Fiction, set in Korea

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

June Hur's *The Silence of Bones* is a richly detailed murder mystery set in early 1800s Joseon Korea. It follows Seol, a *damo* or young female police servant, as she assists the reserved Inspector Han in the investigation of the murder of a noblewoman who had been brutally disfigured. In the process of the investigation, she uncovers connections to forbidden love, to dangerous religious ideas and even to her own painful past.

Hur's intricate mystery of the death of Lady O mirrors the intricacy of the Joseon period itself. Hur includes details of the inner workings of Joseon society from the emperor at the very top to butchers and executioners at the very bottom. Seol's character has a unique role in the story. A woman of low rank, she is regularly overlooked by more powerful players. Her relative "invisibility" allows her opportunities to uncover hidden clues as people around her speak freely in her presence. Her innate inquisitiveness and skepticism result in a relentless quest for truth and justice for the deceased. Increasingly, she finds herself navigating dangerous situations, but she refuses to give up until justice is served. Additionally, Seol's partnership with Inspector Han demonstrates that uncovering truth requires determination, the courage to challenge those in power, and close collaboration. Through these narrative choices, the book raises important questions about who controls information, whose voices are heard, and how systems of power can obstruct justice.



### Silence and Voice

Hur uses silence and voice as major themes that connect with bigger ideas about power, truth, and identity. The book begins with the murder of Lady O, who is silenced



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forever. Silence is the expected norm for all women, from the low-ranking *damo* to the highest-ranking noblewomen. As the story progresses, many characters choose silence because it keeps them alive. Seol tries to live by the motto, “I have a mouth, but I mustn’t speak; ears, but I mustn’t hear; eyes, but I mustn’t see.” Fortunately for the investigation, she fails to keep quiet about what she observes (p. 11). Seol learns when it’s smart to speak up and when keeping quiet is the better option. As she investigates the murder, she’s also discovering her own voice and agency. The more she uncovers about the crime, the more she realizes she has the power to speak up, even when it’s risky. Her partnership with Inspector Han matters because he’s someone who actually listens to her and values what she has to say. In the end, refusing to stay silent becomes a form of resistance. When Seol and others decide to voice dangerous truths, they’re challenging the social order that relies on their silence. There’s even some irony in the title: the bones might be silent, but they force the people examining them to speak up.

### Identity and Belonging

Another powerful theme in the book is identity and belonging. As an orphan and low-ranking *damo*, Seol struggles to find her place in such a rigid society. Her childhood memories allude to her family’s loss of privilege and status among the aristocracy. The mystery of her older brother’s disappearance and abandonment also plays a prominent role in the story as Seol’s investigation of the murder leads to her discovering and confronting secrets from her past. This theme of identity will resonate particularly well with older adolescents navigating their own understanding of who they are in relationship with their family.

### Common Core ELA Standards for Reading Literature

Here are some key ELA Common Core standards that would apply to reading *The Silence of Bones*:

- **RL.9-10.1 or RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **RL.9-10.2 or RL.11-12.2:** Determine themes and analyze their development over the course of the text.



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- **RL.9-10.3 or RL.11-12.3:** Analyze how complex characters develop, interact with others, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- **RL.9-10.6 or RL.11-12.6:** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States.

This book is best used in a high school ELA classroom. The historical fiction murder mystery plotline is set against rich details of Joseon Korea (1392–1920). The plot is intricate. It's strongly recommended that students be familiar with the basic tenets of Confucianism and understand the term *patriarchy* before reading the book (see Culture Notes for this book). Hur introduces a myriad of Joseon terms but is careful to provide definitions or an understanding from context. How and why Catholicism was forbidden during this time would also be helpful to the reader as this plays an important role in the development of the story and of Seoul, herself. Beyond ELA, *The Silence of Bones* also works well in a premodern World History or Asian Studies classroom as enrichment reading. Korean history is often overlooked in World History courses as the “shrimp between the two whales” of China and Japan. This book provides a fascinating glimpse of Joseon society that would allow students to compare and contrast their study of premodern China and Japan with Korea. Students will gain a deep understanding of the rigid social hierarchy and patriarchy of Joseon Korea.

### **Suggestions for Using *The Silence of Bones***

#### **Before Reading**

**Historical Context Stations:** Set up learning stations around the room covering Joseon-period Korea: historical overview, Confucianism basics, social stratification, the role of women, Catholicism in Joseon Korea. Students rotate through stations taking notes to build background knowledge.

#### **During Reading**

**Vocabulary Journal:** Have students create an ongoing vocabulary journal for Korean terms used in the novel (*damo*, *yangban*, *norigae*, etc.). They can add illustrations, definitions, and examples as they read.



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**Scene Illustration:** Students choose a pivotal scene and create an illustration with a written explanation of their artistic choices and the scene's significance.

**Evidence Board:** Set up a class "murder board" like detectives use. Students add clues, suspects, and theories as they read, updating it after each section. This makes the investigation process visible and collaborative.

### **Post Reading**

**Podcast Episode:** Groups create a true-crime style podcast episode analyzing the case, incorporating textual evidence and discussing the social context.

**One-Pager Activity:** Students create a one-page summary of the book that includes elements determined by the classroom teachers such as scene illustration, student-generated discussion questions, a rating, plot summary, character development, and so on.

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