

Bridge to Terabithia – Friendship Theme

<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/bridge-to-terabithia/themes/friendship-grief-and-loss>

The friendship at the heart of *Bridge to Terabithia* abruptly becomes a source of grief and loss near the end of the novel. As the story unfolds, however, Katherine Paterson charts the ways in which the power of friendship can become a kind of roadmap to navigating grief. Ultimately, Paterson argues that the lessons of intimacy and respect learned within the bounds of friendship—and the gift of seeing oneself through another’s eyes, which any good friendship offers—are the only salve against sorrow and mourning.

Katherine Paterson structures *Bridge to Terabithia* by building up the central friendship between Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke, two children living in rural Virginia, to demonstrate the ways in which friendship provides one with stability, comfort, refuge, and even identity. When Jess and Leslie meet, Jess is dissatisfied with his relationships to several members of his family, and his friendships at school feel strained and performative.

At the start of the novel, Jess doesn’t seem to have ever known real friendship and his relationships with his sisters are contentious at best. Though Jess and his impressionable younger sister, May Belle, adore each other, Jess doesn’t have any real, profound connection with his other sisters. For the most part, they treat him badly, and he resents them as a result. At school, things are not much better. Jess has a few friends, including the hyper-competitive Gary Fulcher, but generally these friendships are shallow and rooted in taunting, teasing, and besting one another.

When Leslie moves to town, she and Jess become fast friends after a brief, fleeting period of competitiveness. Their friendship is genuine, unpretentious, and based on mutual trust, respect, and indeed love. Being friends with Leslie changes Jess and opens him up not just to hidden parts of himself, but to the greater hidden magic of the world around him. Jess and Leslie, teased at school for being so close, decide to create a secret world of their own. Beyond the creek behind Leslie’s house, they settle down on a patch of forest and name the land Terabithia. Terabithia becomes Jess and Leslie’s escape from the world, and a symbol of their freewheeling friendship.

At the height of their happiness, Jess thinks to himself, “Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self—his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond.” As Jess and Leslie’s friendship grows and deepens, it becomes, for Jess, a gateway to “worlds beyond” his own. Jess’s strong feelings for Leslie show that true friendship is not just a distraction or a passing fancy—it is a key to other realms, both imaginary and in oneself. This profound moment also foreshadows the ways in which Leslie’s friendship will continue to guide Jess through the realm of grief, which he is soon to enter.

After Leslie falls to her death while crossing the creek that divides Terabithia from her backyard one stormy morning, Paterson’s novel switches gears to show how the lessons learned within a particularly important friendship can cushion the loss of that friendship, and even enable a person to better cope with grief. When Jess learns of Leslie’s death, he is, at first, in total denial. He doesn’t believe his family when they tell him Leslie is dead,

insisting that the entire thing is simply a bad dream. Before long, however, Jess's family helps him to realize that he must confront the fact of Leslie's death—and his complicated, almost indescribable feelings of grief, loss, and rage.

When Jess first learns of Leslie's death, he is so traumatized and filled with guilt for not going with her to Terabithia on the morning of her demise that he enters a state of denial which persists for over a day. He doesn't feel ready to confront the loss of Leslie—he is greedy for more time with her and unwilling to imagine a world in which they are not together. Jess even believes that Leslie has “failed” or “tricked him” by making him “leave his old self behind and come into her world,” only to leave him abruptly by dying. Jess doesn't yet see how entering Leslie's “world” has in fact prepared him to process and mourn her death in a healthy way.

After visiting the Burkes' house and witnessing the outpouring of grief among Leslie's distraught family members, Jess realizes that his friendship with Leslie—brief though it was—has provided him with a roadmap through his grief. The lessons Leslie taught Jess, he understands, will help him not just through his present state of mourning but through the larger confusions and disappointments that life will surely bring. Jess chooses to commemorate Leslie's death by visiting Terabithia, building a funeral wreath, and laying it down in the sacred pine groves where he and Leslie once sought counsel from Terabithia's “spirits.” Jess also welcomes his sister May Belle to Terabithia as its new “queen.”

Previously, he barred May Belle from entering Terabithia and warned her that she'd be in trouble if she ever told its secrets to anyone. By the end of the novel, not only does Jess welcome May Belle to his and Leslie's secret world—he suggests that one day, his other sisters might join him, as well. Jess's actions demonstrate that Leslie's warmth, imagination, and true friendship have shown Jess how to grieve: not by isolating oneself, entering a state of denial, or forgetting the past, but by using the things learned within the bounds of such a special friendship to forge a way forward.

The painful climax of the *Bridge to Terabithia*, unforeseen and unexpected for the characters within the book and readers of it alike, cuts short Jess and Leslie's beautiful and vibrant friendship. However, the book's falling action illuminates Paterson's central argument: that the truest friendships provide all participants with the grace, understanding, and sense of unconditional love to make their way through times of grief and sorrow.