



The Phoenix Files: Contact
By Chris Mophew

Summary

This second book in the series begins at the same moment the previous one finished. The days are still counting down towards the impending Tabitha catastrophe orchestrated by the Shackleton Co-operative, designed to destroy the world outside Phoenix. At the end of the first book, we are shocked to hear a phone ringing as we know that there is no phone, radio, television or internet contact with the outside world. When Jordan, Peter and Luke chase down the ringing phone, they figure out that it belongs to one of the Shackleton people. Luke and Jordan decide to determine whose phone it is, while a still-reluctant Peter follows.

The school principal, Ms. Pryor, attempts to rein in Luke, Jordan and Peter by keeping them busy as “staff-student liaison officers,” which allows her to closely monitor their activities. However, with clues from Crazy Bill, the trio locates and steals a phone, finds secret underground passages and rooms, uncovers some of the awful nature of what Tabitha does to people, and eventually attracts the attention of Mr. Shackleton – with disastrous results.

This time Peter is narrating the story, not Luke as in the first book. Peter is still, without much success, trying to establish a relationship with Jordan, and Luke desperately wants to contact his father. However, while these themes continue from the first book, there are important new developments as well: the mystery of Tabitha unravels; there are changes to Peter and Jordan; and there is a growing sense that Peter's old friends, Cathryn, Tank and Mike, know or are involved in something.

New developments in Contact

Tabitha

The question of what Tabitha actually is and what it does is one of the focuses of this book, as the three central characters slowly piece the puzzle together. Students can set up a class wiki to share their ideas about what Tabitha is, gathering evidence from the book as the story is being read.

References to growing evidence about Tabitha:

- Jordan suggests Tabitha could involve a kind of poison. Or it could be a password that sets off a bunch of bombs. (p11)
- We are given the email from two years before about a Tabitha trial with photos of terrible things being done to animals. What is happening? (p103)
- What are they doing? Is it a plague as Luke suggests? (p105?)
- Mr. Shackleton's “abstract” paintings – create what you imagine they look like. Peter thinks they are “meant to be animals.” (p115)



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- Ketterley uses the word “candidate” – what might that mean? Candidates for what? (p193)
 - Are Crazy Bill's abilities a “side effect of the fallout”? What might that mean? (p193-194)
 - Crazy Bill demonstrates his superhuman powers in fighting the guards. (p262)
 - Crazy Bill calls out to them, “Find me under the ground. I have to – we have to go here together.” Predict what this might be about. (p266)
 - *Tabitha Trial – Final* is the DVD in the box. (p237)
 - The bodies being eaten from inside and disintegrating. What is it all about? (p241)
 - Shackleton tells them he will not apply the real Tabitha to Officer Reeve. It would be ineffective at this stage as he is a “candidate.” Again, any more ideas about what that might mean? (p301)
 - Why does Officer Reeve not disintegrate as the others have? (p302)

Changes to Jordan and Peter

References to changes in relation to Jordan and Peter:

- Jordan is having “funny turns” and won't tell Peter what they are. (p28)
- Jordan has another “attack” of whatever it is. (p115)
- Are Jordan and Luke keeping secrets from Peter? Or don't they really trust him? (p125)
- Jordan has been crying. (p181)
- Peter “stumbles” on a box called Tabitha. Did it call him? Does he have “powers”? Also, how did Jordan know Officer Reeve would be at the cafe? (p234)
- Jordan thinks she is going nuts. She has headaches, but is it someone sending messages telepathically? Who? (p251)
- Jordan throws up right on the spot where she had previously had a dizzy spell. (p306)

Cathryn, Tank and Mike

We discovered in the first book that these three schoolmates had been friends of Peter's, and that perhaps Cathryn was more than a friend. But something caused a rift. It becomes apparent in this book that they are going to play a more major part, so clues need to be identified early.



References to mysterious developments with Cathryn, Tank and Mike:

- Peter sees Cathryn behaving suspiciously around someone's locker. (p53)
- Cathryn doesn't seem herself and is about to speak to Peter. (p76)
- Cathryn's mother's number is on Ms. Pryor's phone. (p81)
- Mike's mother deliberately ignores Peter. (p157)
- Mike, Tank and Cat seem to be up to something – they have been “chosen” but by whom and for what? (p175-176)
- Cat sees the DVD and thinks Jordan, Luke and Peter are responsible for what is on it. (p245)

The plot thickens: conspiracy fiction

While *Arrival*, the first book in the Phoenix Files series, was characterized by features of the futuristic thriller, this second volume moves more clearly into the sub genre of conspiracy fiction (the author even uses the term on p204) and a place to start is with some of the motifs of the genre:

- Characters discover a secretive conspiracy.
- It can be difficult to pin down what is involved in the conspiracy.
- Central characters are often amateur investigators who begin by stumbling on a clue which leads to an ever widening conspiracy

The plot is clearly thickening in *Contact* and students will enjoy figuring out the meaning behind the clues in the story. For instance, Shackleton and Calvin talk about using Tabitha “to cleanse the outside world of the human plague.”

Other clues in the style of conspiracy fiction:

- Is Mrs. Stapleton's message a threat or a warning? (p32)
- Peter's father reveals that he has to work on a project for which Mr. Shackleton has brought forward a deadline. (p35)
- Peter's book has been scribbled on. (p38)
- Shackleton and eight partners bought the land for Phoenix from a Dr. Remi Vattel. (p39)
- What can Crazy Bill's clue mean? (p44)
- Peter hears a phone buzzing in Ms. Pryor's office. (p48)
- Peter and Luke observe Ben More entering the principal's office and then disappearing. (p59)



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- How did the drawer just open? Is Peter being set up or assisted in some way? (p73)
 - Everyone in a position of power in Phoenix is on the phone's address book, including Peter's father. This means he has a phone too. Why does he keep this secret from his family? (p82-83)
 - What has happened to Peter's dad? (p120)
 - Luke and Peter call Ms. Pryor's bluff. Why does Peter think she is scared? (p135)
 - Jordan gets the key card to Dr. Montag's office. (p145)
 - The three of them observe Luke's mother being kissed by Dr. Montag. (p159)
 - The Co-operative staff are alerted to Luke, Jordan and Peter as "security risks." Why does the town co-operate with this? Fear? Why does the town need security? Why do so few people question it? (p164)
 - Peter's father urges him to not do anything that will get him hurt. (p166)
 - Peter's father is building something to contain Crazy Bill. (p193)
 - Tunnels underneath the town connect significant buildings, including access to a "secret" top floor of the Shackleton Building: "External Communications." (p207)
 - Officer Reeve tells them to give it up – too dangerous – but agrees to shut down security for them. (p227)
 - They discover the bomb shelter for nine people. What might this suggest? (p260)
 - Shackleton admits to the destruction he is planning. (p283)
 - The suppressor is used on the main characters. It implants a tracking device. If they misbehave pain is stimulated. How will they overcome being able to be tracked? (p295)
 - The threat. If they do not behave then someone close to them will get the treatment. (p305)

Characters

Peter

- This time Peter is recounting the events. Do we get any additional insights into him? The friendship with Luke seems more tentative from his perspective than it did from Luke's.



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- Is Peter becoming obsessed with Luke and Jordan? Is he constructing his own conspiracy theory about their relationship? For example, on page 87 he loses it with Luke and Jordan.
 - Peter's sense of humor positions him as the class clown. Does it turn out to be a good cover? Do you get a different sense of him when the story is told from his perspective, rather than Luke's? What about the other characters? Are they different seen through Peter's eyes?
 - Write or act a scene from Jordan's or Luke's point of view, such as Chapter 9.

Jordan

- Is she the bravest? She is usually the first to act. For instance, she spits in Shackleton's face. (p299)

Noah Shackleton (students might discuss the significance of his Biblical first name)

- The evil mastermind behind the conspiracy who maintains a pleasant, benevolent façade.
- What sort of person is he? A classic, amoral megalomaniac? Consider his reaction to what is happening on page 290.
- His lack of emotion is creepy, isn't it? Is he a sociopath?

Officer Calvin

- Increasingly, he appears to be a thug who loves violence and killing. He has to be held in check.

Officer Reeve

- Continues to help the three main characters. He is aware of what is going on. He pays a terrible price for his work against the Co-operative. Is he still alive?

Ms. Pryor – the school principal

- She is clearly one of the inner group of eight, yet afraid of what might happen if she is seen as not being in control of the students, especially Jordan, Luke and Peter.

Peter's father

- Part of the original Shackleton team that set up Phoenix, and whose role is ostensibly as the publicity person who writes press releases. (p13)
- Peter tests his father with the phone. What do you make of the scene that follows? Is Peter's father telling the truth? The whole story? Why does he warn Peter against Luke and Jordan? Is he naïve in taking them into the building? (p89)

Crazy Bill

- It is still not clear what has happened to him to cause his powers, and he remains unpredictable.



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- A mythology grows up about him – eating human hearts, for instance.
 - What might students predict about his role in future events?

Intertextual references

- Gryffindor common room from the Harry Potter series. (p45)
- The Wizard of Oz (p267)
- References to dystopias in the book extracts they are studying in English class. (p76)

Map of the town

- Since the setting of the town is crucial to events, it might prove useful to plot a map of Phoenix to track where Luke, Jordan and Peter go. Much information about this, such as the location of the school, houses, the paths, the park, the shops, library, etc., is given in the first book, *Arrival*. In addition to the layout of the town indicated in *Arrival*, *Contact* provides detail on a more micro-level of the interior of the Shackleton building (p101), such as the Welcome area, town hall space, cafeteria, meeting rooms, offices, maintenance, and the top floor where Shackleton's office is.
- Additionally, the tunnels that link the significant buildings in the town can be mapped.
- Knowledge of the layout of Phoenix might be crucial in further books in the series. For instance, Jordan seems to be adversely affected when she is in a particular place in the Shackleton building.

Follow-on Activity

- "A decent conspiracy theory is made up of hard facts, the invention lies in drawing connections." (Thomas Jones) With a partner, or in a small group, create your own conspiracy theory fiction beginning with hard facts. You will need to do some research once you have decided on a general area that might be fruitful for a conspiracy.
- Here is an example from the article by Thomas Jones:
"Diana, Princess of Wales and campaigner against landmines, died in mysterious circumstances in Paris in August 1997; in July 1998, Brazil's star striker, Ronaldo, fell mysteriously ill the night before the World Cup final at the Stade de France in Paris, a match in which France defeated Brazil 3-0; on the same day, David Ginola, retired French soccer player and sometime L'Oréal model, became the new face of the anti-landmine movement. So far, so unconnected. But now let's posit the existence of a mysterious secret organization working tirelessly and ruthlessly to improve the fortunes of French soccer players, an organization so shadowy that not even the players themselves know of its activities or existence ..."
- "The second rule to bear in mind when putting together a conspiracy theory is that in order to hold water, it needs to be circular, or rather spiral, so that any criticism can be sucked in and turned into evidence in its favour" (Thomas Jones in the London Review of Books, v27:20 October 2005.)



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- Consider that a good conspiracy fiction follows this maxim: "Unfortunately in Phoenix, what should be true is almost never what is." (p5)
 - A good conspiracy fiction requires not only the right content but style of writing. There must be plenty of tension, clues slowly released, and chapters ending on cliffhangers.
 - There are many examples in *Contact* that you can use as models and inspiration. For example, getting into Ketterley's house. (p185) Analyze how the writing creates suspense, such as shortened sentences – even two-word ones.
 - Much of the enjoyment in conspiracy fiction comes from predicting what will happen. So you need cliffhangers as well, such as on page 191.

Brainstorm

- Drawing on all the knowledge and clues provided in the first two books, predict generally what might happen in the third book – which will cover the next 18 days.
- Write the follow-on sentence after the end of this book and compare with classmates. Which is the best and the most likely?

Related Reading

The Knife of Never Letting Go; The Ask and the Answer by Patrick Ness
Gone; Hunger; Lies by Michael Grant
The Hunger Games; Catching Fire by Suzanne Collins
The Lost Conspiracy by Frances Hardinge
The DaVinci Code by Dan Brown
Scarecrow by Matthew Reilly
How I Live Now by Meg Rosoff
Darklands Trilogy by Anthony Eaton

Film and Television

The Pelican Brief
The X-Files
Edge of Darkness
State of Play
The DaVinci Code

Study Guide adapted from Teacher's Notes by Dr. Pam Macintyre from Hardie Grant Egmont.