

The Bone Tree

William Morrow

By Greg Iles
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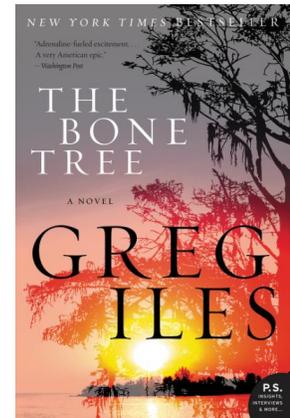
Introduction

Former prosecutor Penn Cage and his fiancée, reporter and publisher Caitlin Masters, have barely escaped with their lives after being attacked by wealthy businessman Brody Royal and his Double Eagles, a KKK sect with ties to some of Mississippi's most powerful men. But the real danger has only begun as FBI Special Agent John Kaiser warns Penn that Brody wasn't the true leader of the Double Eagles. The puppeteer who actually controls the terrorist group is a man far more fearsome: the chief of the state police's Criminal Investigations Bureau, Forrest Knox.

The only way Penn can save his father, Dr. Tom Cage—who is fleeing a murder charge as well as corrupt cops bent on killing him—is either to make a devil's bargain with Knox or destroy him. While Penn desperately pursues both options, Caitlin uncovers the real story behind a series of unsolved civil rights murders that may hold the key to the Double Eagles' downfall. The trail leads her deep into the past, into the black backwaters of the Mississippi River, to a secret killing ground used by slave owners and the Klan for over two hundred years . . . a place of terrifying evil known only as “the bone tree.”

Questions for Discussion

1. What real history does Iles use to set the stage for events in *The Bone Tree*?
2. Iles's *Natchez Burning* trilogy has been compared to Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*, which also features a journalist. What role does journalism play in Greg Iles's work, and how does it affect the behavior of the various characters?
3. Mayor Penn Cage and his father, Dr. Tom Cage, appear to be on separate paths in this story, though we know they probably agree on many things. Discuss their individual journeys and the moral choices they have to make.
4. Are the residents of Natchez, Mississippi, still living in the past? And are past sins taking their toll on those living in the present?
5. Describe the relationships among the Double Eagles, the Mafia, and the assassinations of JFK, RFK and MLK.



6. One antagonist in this novel is Lieutenant Colonel Forrest Knox, and he spent part of his career working in New Orleans. Is there a difference between the law and sense of justice in New Orleans and in Natchez?
7. Both *The Bone Tree* and *Natchez Burning* begin with a quote from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. How do Iles's novels compare with that classic of Southern politics and justice?
8. We see more of FBI Special Agent John Kaiser in *The Bone Tree*. How do his goals differ from Penn's and Tom's?
9. How does Tom's history converge with the events leading up to the assassination of JFK? Does Tom know what's happening around him during this time?
10. Sins of the past that have enshrouded Natchez for decades appear to be impenetrable. What does Penn really think can be done to save those he loves? And is justice even possible in such a place?
11. Where does the Double Eagles history of crime and hate play into the many assassinations that took place in the 1960s?
12. Much of the novel is centered around what Tom has done—or is suspected of doing—in the past. There is an old saying to the effect that the sins of the father will be put upon the son. If that's true in this story, what sin is Penn guilty of and how does that affect his family?
13. Describe Caitlin Masters' role at *The Bone Tree*. Is she driven by journalistic pursuit or some higher form of justice? Ultimately, why does she choose to take this journey alone and not with her fiancée, Penn?
14. *The Bone Tree* is an epic novel that fills over 800 pages. What do you think the final novel in the trilogy, *Unwritten Laws*, will uncover? Do you think Penn Cage will come out unscathed?