

The Ghost of Molly Flynn: Book One

Unitarian Universalist Religious Education Study and Discussion Guide

By Josh de Lioncourt

About This Guide

This edition adapts the general study guide for Unitarian Universalist Religious Exploration programs, youth groups, family discussion, and UU book groups. It keeps literary discussion at the center while inviting readers to explore the story through contemporary UU shared values: Love, Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity. The questions are invitations rather than tests of belief. This UU version of the guide encourages young people to examine ideas, bring their own experience, ask difficult questions, listen to others, and develop their own responsible understanding. The various sections and activities in this guide are meant to be used or skipped as educators, leaders, or participants deem appropriate for their group. Each chapter includes two general literary questions and at least two questions explicitly connecting the story with UU values. Spoiler note: This guide discusses the entire story, including its ending.

UU Values to Notice While Reading

- Love: What holds people together, and what does loving behavior require?
- Interdependence: How do people, communities, other beings, and the world depend upon one another?
- Pluralism: How do characters learn from experiences and perspectives different from their own?
- Justice: Who has power? How is it used, challenged, or shared?
- Transformation: How do characters remain open to growth and change?
- Generosity: How do characters share gifts, attention, resources, or hope?
- Equity: What helps each person flourish with dignity and worthiness?

Before Reading

1. Molly has remained twelve years old for three hundred years. What might the difference be between getting older and growing?
2. What makes a community a place of genuine belonging?
3. Pirates, ghosts, sorcerers, and dragons arrive with familiar reputations. What happens when someone does not match the story we have already heard about them?
4. Notice moments when characters must protect themselves, trust another person, offer help, challenge authority, or change their minds. Which UU values might help them make those choices?

Chapter-by-Chapter Guide

Chapter 1. The Ghost in the Looking Glass

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does Molly describe being a ghost, and what do her jokes reveal about the loneliness underneath?
2. Why is the looking glass important to Molly's understanding of herself?
3. UU focus — Equity and Love: Molly has spent centuries unseen and largely alone. What does it mean to recognize the inherent worthiness of someone whom others cannot see? How might genuine attention be an act of love?
4. UU focus — Transformation: Molly believes she has been unchanged for three hundred years. What might it mean to grow inwardly even when outward circumstances seem fixed?

Chapter 2. The Night Mayor

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What does Nicholas understand about Molly that she has not fully admitted to herself?
2. What does leaving Crownsworth ask Molly to risk?
3. UU focus — Transformation: How does Nicholas encourage Molly to become open to change rather than simply endure her existence?
4. UU focus — Pluralism: How does Nicholas help Molly discover her own path rather than telling her exactly what she must do?

Chapter 3. Stowed-Away Stowaway

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What finally matters more to Molly than her fear of leaving Crownsworth?
2. What does boarding an unknown ship symbolize in Molly's larger journey?
3. UU focus — Transformation: When can choosing uncertainty be necessary for growth? What makes Molly's choice courageous rather than merely reckless?
4. UU focus — Love and Transformation: Does caring for ourselves sometimes require leaving what is familiar? What responsibilities do we still have when taking such a risk?

Chapter 4. The Story and the Storm

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What do the sailors' stories teach Molly about Terodyn and Shadowcloak before she encounters them herself?
2. How does the chapter move from curiosity and humor into danger?
3. UU focus — Pluralism: Why should we remain open to revising what we believe about someone when we encounter new perspectives?
4. UU focus — Interdependence: During the storm, how does everyone's vulnerability challenge Molly's habit of thinking of herself as separate from the living world?

Chapter 5. Rock Bottom

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What clues suggest that the wreck of the Terror is not an ordinary sunken ship?
2. How does reaching literal ‘rock bottom’ connect with Molly’s larger journey?
3. UU focus — Interdependence: The sea suddenly has power over Molly despite her ghostly nature. What does this suggest about the limits of individual independence?
4. UU focus — Transformation: How can encountering something we cannot explain change the questions we ask about ourselves and the world?

Chapter 6. Threads and Threats

Discussion and Response Questions

1. Why is Shadowcloak’s ability to touch Molly especially frightening?
2. What first impressions does Shadowcloak create, and how does Molly respond?
3. UU focus — Equity and Justice: Shadowcloak claims authority over Molly without her consent. What makes a relationship of power fair or unfair? What would Molly need in order to have meaningful agency?
4. UU focus — Pluralism: How can Molly remain curious about Shadowcloak without excusing threatening behavior? Can openness and healthy boundaries exist together?

Chapter 7. Crumbling and Conjuring

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What does Shadowcloak discover about Molly’s conjured objects?
2. How does repairing Shadowcloak’s leg begin to change their relationship?
3. UU focus — Generosity: Molly uses an ability she possesses to meet another person’s need. What distinguishes generosity from obedience or coercion?
4. UU focus — Interdependence: How does needing Molly’s help reveal that even a fearsome pirate depends on others?

Chapter 8. Captain’s Privilege

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What does Molly learn about Shadowcloak and the rules of their unusual partnership?
2. Who seems to hold greater power in their relationship at this point, and why?
3. UU focus — Justice: When does authority become privilege? What responsibilities should come with leadership?
4. UU focus — Equity: Molly is three hundred years old but appears twelve. How should we respect someone’s experience while recognizing how age, appearance, or status affect treatment?

Chapter 9. The Isle of Souls

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What surprises Molly about the Isle of Souls upon her arrival, and why do you think she surprises the sailors there in turn?
2. Why is discovering other ghosts important after Molly's centuries of isolation?
3. UU focus — Interdependence: How does finding a community change Molly's understanding of herself? In what ways do communities help individuals flourish?
4. UU focus — Pluralism: What might Molly gain by encountering many ways of living an afterlife rather than assuming her experience is universal?

Chapter 10. Chockablock and Skullduggery

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How do the island's ghosts react to Molly and to Shadowcloak's name?
2. How does Molly become a more active participant in the quest?
3. UU focus — Equity: How can reputations and labels affect the way a community treats someone such as 'Crazy Bobby'? What responsibility do we have to look beyond labels?
4. UU focus — Pluralism: When everyone seems to share the same story about a person, why can it still be important to seek other perspectives?

Chapter 11. The Pirate, Peabody

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What do Peabody's reactions to Shadowcloak and the things he says about him add to Molly's understanding of the pirate?
2. How does learning that the map may be aboard the Great Divide redirect the quest?
3. UU focus — Pluralism: How should Molly decide which stories about the past to believe when different people remember events differently?
4. UU focus — Interdependence: How do choices made by one generation continue to affect people who come later?

Chapter 12. Reporting for Duty

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What similarities do Molly and Bobby share in their desire for adventure?
2. By the end of the chapter, is Molly acting more like a passenger, recruit, or leader?
3. UU focus — Generosity: Molly makes room for Bobby in an adventure she could have kept to herself. What can sharing opportunity mean as a form of generosity?
4. UU focus — Interdependence and Love: What begins turning Shadowcloak's assortment of recruits into a community? What does a community owe its newest members?

Chapter 13. Skull and Crossbones

Discussion and Response Questions

1. Why does learning that the Great Divide is bound for Terodyn trouble Shadowcloak, and what does his explanation reveal about his past?
2. Why is Molly's promotion to first mate important to her development?
3. UU focus — Transformation: What signs suggest that Molly and Shadowcloak are both changing through their relationship?
4. UU focus — Love and accountability: How can Molly care about Shadowcloak while still challenging his anger, secrecy, or behavior?

Chapter 14. Of Ships and Shanties

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does the atmosphere aboard the Terror change as the crew grows?
2. What do songs, jokes, and wordplay add to the story's tone?
3. UU focus — Interdependence: What different gifts do Molly, Bobby, Nana, and Shadowcloak bring to the ship? Why does a healthy community need different contributions?
4. UU focus — Pluralism: How can humor, song, story, and conversation become different ways of making meaning together?

Chapter 15. Shore Leave

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does Molly use clothing and appearance to express identity for herself and Bobby?
2. What expectations has Molly formed about Terodyn before entering it?
3. UU focus — Equity: Why can giving everyone exactly the same thing be different from helping each person have what they need to flourish?
4. UU focus — Pluralism and identity: What role should individuals have in deciding how they present themselves to the world?

Chapter 16. Kitty Cap

Discussion and Response Questions

1. Which details make Terodyn feel magical and larger than life?
2. Why is the encounter with the cat more important than it first appears?
3. UU focus — Interdependence: How does a seemingly small encounter—with an animal, stranger, or unexpected event—change the direction of Molly's journey?
4. UU focus — Transformation: How can curiosity about the unexpected become a spiritual or ethical practice rather than simply a way of solving a puzzle?

Chapter 17. The Grubadub Pub

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What evidence suggests Molly and Bobby may not be safely invisible in Terodyn?
2. Which details build suspense as they try to escape?
3. UU focus — Justice and safety: What happens when people with power can detect, control, or threaten those who are vulnerable? What responsibilities should power carry?
4. UU focus — Love and Interdependence: How do Molly and Bobby look after one another when neither person can guarantee safety?

Chapter 18. Late and Later

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does Molly handle falling into the water differently now than earlier?
2. Why might the author place humor in the middle of a dangerous chase?
3. UU focus — Transformation: What does Molly's changed reaction to the sea show about the difference between becoming fearless and learning to live with fear?
4. UU focus — Joy and resilience: Can laughter be meaningful during difficult times without minimizing danger? How might joy help a community endure?

Chapter 19. Horn of the Unicorn

Discussion and Response Questions

1. Why is Molly's conjuring ability especially valuable during the pursuit?
2. How does Molly adjust after her first attempt with the unicorn horn, and how do Bobby's advice and the limits of the Terror's cannons affect what she does next?
3. UU focus — Generosity and community: Molly's unusual gift becomes useful to everyone. How can communities make room for gifts that may initially seem strange or impractical?
4. UU focus — Transformation: What can Molly learn from adjusting her approach when circumstances change or an attempt does not have the result she hoped for?

Chapter 20. Dead Man's Cave

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What disadvantages does the ghostly crew face as sunrise approaches?
2. How does Shadowcloak's damaged body create both danger and dark comedy?
3. UU focus — Interdependence: Why can accepting help be as important as offering it?
4. UU focus — Equity and accessibility: How might a community change its practices when one member's body works differently or requires assistance? What would it mean to center dignity rather than pity?

Chapter 21. Treasure and Trash

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does searching through old objects reveal pieces of Shadowcloak's past?
2. Why does Molly respond differently to Shadowcloak's body than she did earlier?
3. UU focus — Equity and Love: How does knowing someone more deeply change the temptation to define them by appearance, reputation, or frightening differences?
4. UU focus — Love: Why can an object with little monetary worth become precious? Who gets to decide what has value?

Chapter 22. A Skull Can Only Grin

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What does learning to steer symbolize about Molly's changing role aboard the Terror?
2. How can Molly tell what Shadowcloak feels when his face cannot make ordinary expressions?
3. UU focus — Equity: What assumptions might people make when someone communicates differently? How can we learn to listen beyond familiar signals?
4. UU focus — Transformation and trust: How can giving someone meaningful responsibility help them grow?

Chapter 23. Chat and Checkers

Discussion and Response Questions

1. What is troubling Bobby, and how does Molly encourage him to talk?
2. Why is the checkers pouch meaningful at the chapter's end?
3. UU focus — Love and pastoral care: Molly cannot fix Bobby's feelings for him. What does she do instead that demonstrates compassionate presence?
4. UU focus — Pluralism: Why is it important to let another person's experience remain their own rather than assuming we completely understand it?

Chapter 24. The Map

Discussion and Response Questions

1. Why is Molly uniquely suited to the mission aboard the Great Divide?
2. Is Molly justified in asking Larry to give her Shadowcloak's map? Defend your answer using Larry's family instructions and Molly's circumstances.
3. UU focus — Justice and conscience: When rules, property, loyalty, and competing claims conflict, how should Molly decide what is right?
4. UU focus — Equity and compassion: How does Molly's encounter with Larry Peabody complicate a simple division between 'our side' and 'their side'?

Chapter 25. Dragon Island

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does the setting build anticipation before the treasure is found?
2. What changes do you notice in the way Molly and Shadowcloak speak to each other?
3. UU focus — Interdependence: How has Molly’s success come to depend on relationships she did not have when the novel began?
4. UU focus — Wonder and humility: How can encountering something vast, ancient, or unexpected remind a person that they do not fully understand the world?

Chapter 26. The Boy and the Pirate

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does the dragon challenge expectations?
2. How has Molly become a mediator or leader within the crew?
3. UU focus — Love and accountability: Why does Molly insist that Shadowcloak speak honestly and directly to Bobby? How can accountability strengthen community?
4. UU focus — Justice and power: What responsibilities does a leader have toward people with less power?

Chapter 27. Shadowcloak’s Tale

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does learning Shadowcloak’s past change the meaning of the treasure hunt?
2. What assumptions about him are challenged by his story?
3. UU focus — Pluralism: How does hearing someone’s story firsthand complicate a reputation built from other people’s versions?
4. UU focus — Compassion without erasure: How can understanding the pain behind someone’s choices increase compassion without excusing harm?

Chapter 28. The Treasure

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does the actual treasure compare with what Molly—and you—expected?
2. How does the chapter redefine the word ‘treasure’?
3. UU focus — Generosity and Love: Why can relationships, memories, and objects given meaning through love become more valuable than wealth?
4. UU focus — Interdependence: What does Shadowcloak’s treasure reveal about the way identity is formed through relationships?

Chapter 29. The Girl in the Looking Glass

Discussion and Response Questions

1. How does the final looking-glass scene echo Chapter One?

2. How has Molly changed internally since leaving Crownsworth?
3. UU focus — Transformation: How does Molly’s change embody an ongoing process rather than a finished transformation?
4. UU focus — Love, dignity, and selfhood: What might it mean for Molly’s outside to begin reflecting who she has become inside? How can communities help people become more fully themselves?

Whole-Book UU Discussion

1. Love: Which relationships most change Molly? Does love appear mainly as affection, loyalty, honesty, accountability, belonging, or something else?
2. Transformation: Molly begins convinced that ghosts do not change. What does the story suggest about continuing to grow, and what does that say about being human?
3. Pluralism: Shadowcloak is first known through legend. How does Molly’s understanding change as she hears multiple stories and comes to know him herself?
4. Interdependence: Molly begins as an isolated observer. Trace the moments that gradually make her part of a community.
5. Justice: Shadowcloak begins with enormous power over Molly. How does that relationship change? What makes authority legitimate?
6. Equity: Characters differ in age, appearance, ability, history, and power. When does the crew learn to value what each person uniquely contributes?
7. Generosity: Which gifts matter most? Consider objects, time, attention, skills, trust, stories, forgiveness, and companionship.
8. The treasure ultimately challenges assumptions about value. What makes something—or someone—valuable?
9. How does humor help these characters face death, grief, danger, and uncertainty? Can joy itself be a form of resilience?
10. By the final looking-glass scene, what might Molly have learned about becoming more fully herself?

Connections Across Religious and Wisdom Traditions

Unitarian Universalism is a pluralistic living tradition. UUs draw inspiration from religious, sacred, secular, scientific, philosophical, and human experience. The connections below are starting points for respectful exploration, not claims that complex traditions all teach the same thing.

Judaism

Jewish traditions place strong emphasis on community, ethical responsibility, memory, questioning, and teshuvah—often understood as return, repentance, or turning toward a better path.

- How does remembering the past help Shadowcloak understand who he is in the present?
- Which characters have opportunities to turn, repair harm, or behave differently than before?
- What is the difference between remembering faithfully and becoming trapped by the past?

Christianity

Christian traditions contain many teachings about love of neighbor, grace, forgiveness, transformation, and care for those who are overlooked.

- Who learns to see value in someone whom others dismiss or fear?
- How does Shadowcloak's treasure compare with the idea that what we value reveals something about our hearts?
- What is the difference between forgiveness and pretending harm never happened?

Islam

Islamic traditions strongly emphasize compassion, justice, community, intention, generosity, stewardship, and responsibility.

- When do a character's intentions matter, and when must consequences also be considered?
- What responsibilities come with possessing power, knowledge, wealth, or unusual abilities?
- Where do characters practice generosity with something other than money?

Hindu Traditions

The many Hindu traditions offer diverse understandings of duty (dharma), action and consequence (karma), the self, liberation, devotion, and interconnectedness.

- How do Molly's choices gradually create the person she is becoming?
- What duties come with being a captain, first mate, friend, or community member?
- Molly's spectral body does not age like that of a mortal person, but her inner self changes. What questions does this raise about identity and outward form?

Buddhist Traditions

Buddhist traditions are diverse, but many emphasize impermanence, compassion, awareness, attachment, suffering, and transformation.

- Molly initially defines herself through the belief that she cannot change. What happens when that certainty falls away?
- Which characters suffer because they cling tightly to an identity, reputation, possession, memory, or expectation?
- Can letting go differ from forgetting or ceasing to care?

Earth-Centered and Pagan Traditions

Earth-centered and Pagan traditions encompass many distinct religions and practices. Many honor cycles of nature, sacred place, relationship with the more-than-human world, and human participation within nature.

- The sea repeatedly reminds Molly that she is not beyond the forces of the world. How does nature limit, teach, or transform her?
- How do ocean, island, weather, darkness, daylight, animals, and other nonhuman beings shape the story?
- What changes when we understand a place as a relationship rather than merely a setting or resource?

Humanism

Humanist traditions emphasize human responsibility, reason, evidence, ethical inquiry, compassion, and creating meaning. A novel full of literal ghosts can still provoke Humanist questions.

- How do observation, evidence, experience, and questioning help characters revise what they believe?
- If people help create meaning through relationships and choices, what gives Shadowcloak's treasure its value?
- Which ethical decisions can be examined without agreeing on a theological explanation of Molly's world?

Other Traditions

There are countless other religious traditions from around the world. The above are only a sampling; educators should feel free to choose which to use and others to add to the discussion.

Religious Exploration Activities

Values Map

Choose Molly, Shadowcloak, Bobby, or Nana. Identify three decisions that character makes. For each, name one or more UU values that illuminate the decision.

Covenant for the Terror

Imagine the crew decides that captain's privilege is no longer enough to govern life aboard the Terror. Write a covenant describing how crew members promise to treat one another. Include power, disagreement, safety, responsibility, belonging, and repair after harm.

The Many Stories of Shadowcloak

Create two portraits of Shadowcloak: the legendary pirate others describe and the person Molly comes to know. Discuss how Pluralism asks us to remain curious without ignoring evidence of harm.

What Do We Treasure?

Bring or describe an object that matters for reasons other than monetary value. Sharing should always be optional. Discuss how memory, relationship, gratitude, and generosity create value.

Transformation Timeline

Trace five moments in which Molly changes. Include changes in what she believes, whom she trusts, what she can do, and how she sees herself.

A UU Looking Glass

Without requiring personal disclosure, invite participants to write privately about qualities they hope others recognize in them. Discuss how a community can help people flourish as their authentic selves.

For Religious Educators and Discussion Leaders

This novel provides natural entry points into UU conversations about belonging, identity, transformation, power, consent, community, grief, memory, disability and difference, generosity, and the meanings we give to our lives. The story also contains death, loss, threats, enslavement of ghosts, and frightening situations. Leaders should allow young people to engage these subjects at their own level and should never require personal disclosure. The faith-tradition comparisons are intentionally broad starting points. When developing a full session around another religion, use sources created or recommended by practitioners and educators from that tradition. Pluralism is best served not by flattening religions into similarities, but by approaching each with curiosity, context, and respect. This guide intentionally does not provide a doctrinal answer key. Encourage participants to support interpretations with the text, listen generously to one another, change their minds when warranted, and remain open to more than one thoughtful answer.